10 COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

FAMOUS WESTERN

SUMMER ISSUE

10¢

BULLETS STRIP THE MASK
By T. W. FORD

TROUBLE TRAIL
By ROE RICHMOND

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

FREE OFFER for USERS of FALSE TEETH STAYS TIGHT - OR NO COST!

JIM WON'T EAT OUT BECAUSE HE LOSES HIS FALSE TEETH
BOB NEVER HAS PLATE TROUBLE
RUTH SAYS BOB NEVER HAS PLATE TROUBLE
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Volume 5 ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Number 6

FAMOUS WESTERN

10¢

★ ALL STORIES NEW! ★

★ ★ ★ ★ CONTENTS FOR SUMMER, 1943 ★ ★ ★ ★

TEN COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

BULLETS STRIP THE MASK....(Novelet)..... **By T. W. Ford** 10

No one believed that Babyface could do anything about the masked longrider, but then Bo McFee showed up and the kid swung into action!

BAIT FOR A COYOTE.....(Short Story).....**By Cliff Campbell** 21

Jos Taggare wasn't as complacent about that polecat Curley Dupew as people thought!

GUN BREED.....(Short Story)..... **By Glenn Shirley** 27

"What this town needs is a marshal as deadly with his smokepoles as the coyotes who are making a living hell out of it!"

TROUBLE TRAIL.....(Novel).....**By Ree Richmond** 32

Trouble was Slim Rand's saddlemate, and the trouble trail led Slim to the wolf-den where Paul Tolliver rodded the law!

WOLF SHACKLES.....(Short Story).....**By Cleli Worland** 51

The Constable was on the lookout for Cat Smith—but he didn't look hard enough!

HIT THE TRAIL, GUNSLINGER.(Novel)..... **By E. E. Clement** 56

Boot Hill Lark was going home, hanging up his guns—even if he had to turn tail and run from weaker men!

JOB FOR A LAWMAN...(Short Story) **By Charles D. Richardson, Jr.** 77

Sheriff Ben Bunson never dreamed that a set of false teeth would avenge the brutal killing of old Doc Files!

TEXAS MANHUNT.....(Short Story)..... **By Charles N. Heckelman** 80

Ranger Frome loved danger—so it was just natural for him to pose as his own murderer after he'd salivated the hombre sent to drygulch him!

CATTLE KING.....(Fact Article)..... **By Lee Floren** 84

The story of Charles Goodnight!

FAMILY TREE OF THE COWPONY.(Fact Article) **By Kenneth P. Wood** 89

There's quite a genealogical story behind those broncs!

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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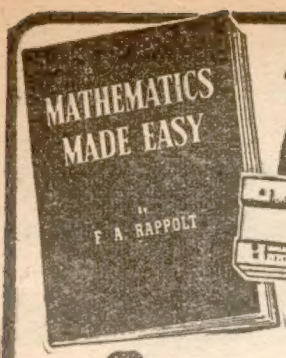

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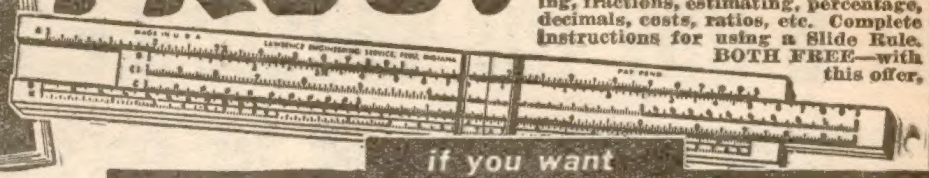

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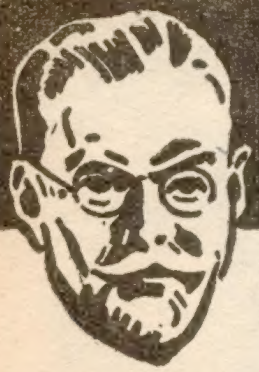

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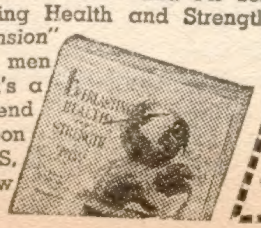

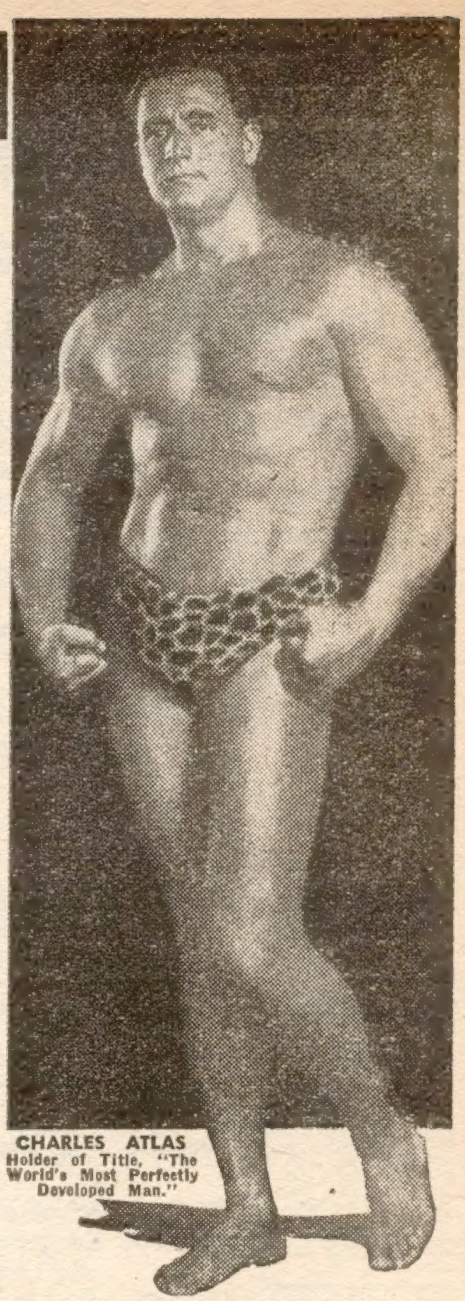

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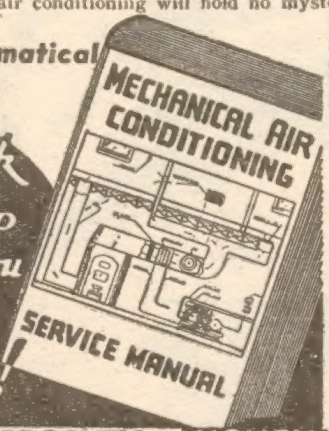

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A masked brigand was terrorizing the Bob outfit, cutting down its riders, one by one, until the entire crew was demoralized. But Baby-face Ogden had ideas on the subject, and when they imported a tough owlhoot exterminator known as Bo McFee, Ogden knew what to do . . .

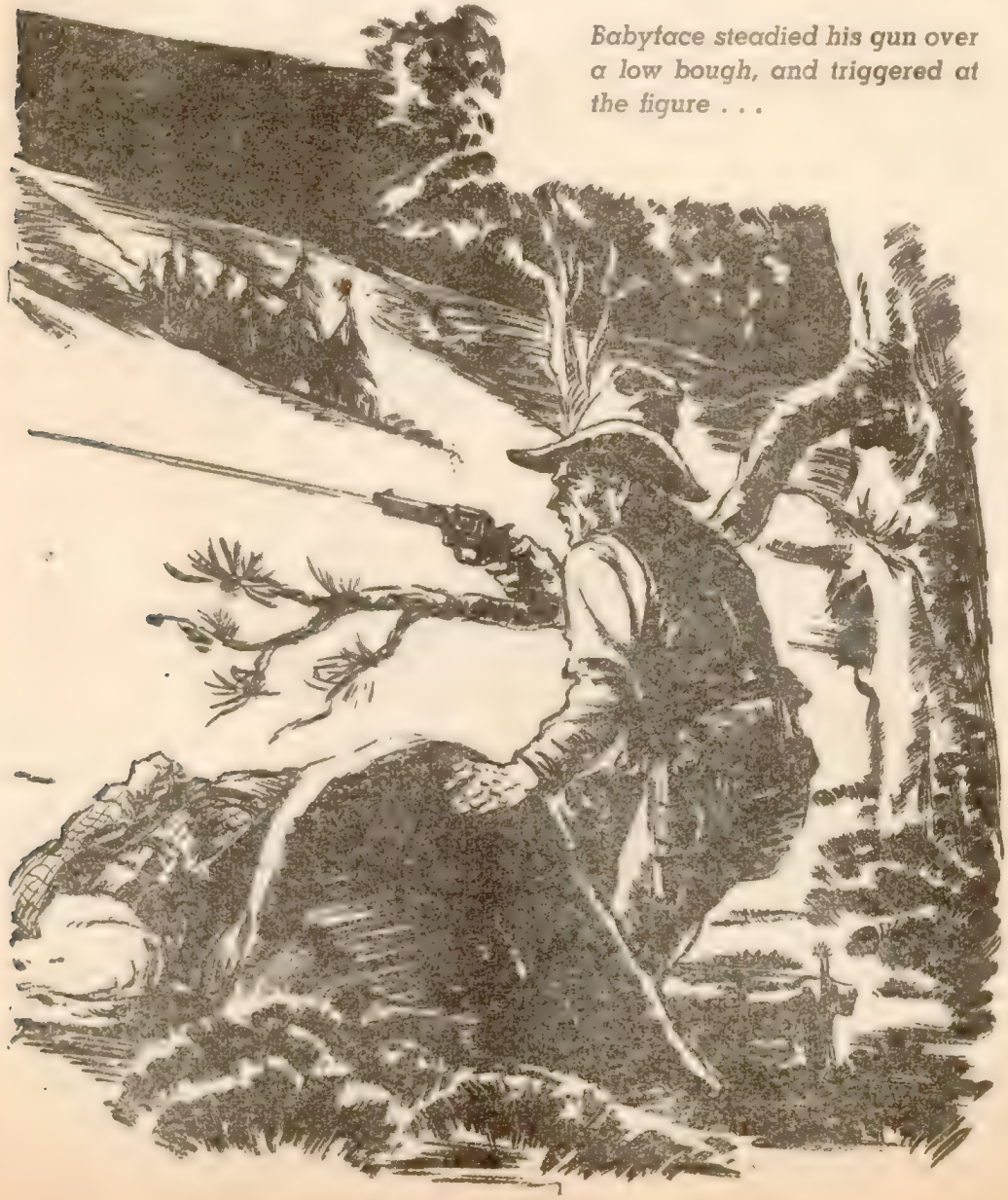
A COMPLETE NOVELET

BULLETS STRIP THE MASK

By T. W. Ford

THEY brought Lew Jackson in just as Hardy, the foreman of the Bob outfit came up the road from town. A couple of the boys had found him, Jackson, stretched beside his pony in the coulee down at the south end, his thigh smashed by a bullet. Between them they had managed to bring him in. Encountering a third one of the outfit over in the haylands, they had sent him ahead to get the buckboard hitched up to take Jackson to the doctor in town. Now he lay on it, lips wedged white under his droopy mustache against the pain. The boys had poured some redeye in him but it wasn't helping much.

Then Hardy came slamming up on his horse and hit the ground running. "What's happened?" he demanded as he hustled up. There was whisky on his breath. It was the only time stern-faced Concho Hardy touched the stuff, when he was in town. Then it was two quick shots, one after the other, and he'd stalk out of a place as if he had twisted the Devil's own tail. He looked like a big man with



Babyface steadied his gun over a low bough, and triggered at the figure . . .

blocks of heavy shoulders running into a scrawny frame propped on beanpoles of legs. He was reputed one of the best segundos south of the Peace River. "What's happened?" he snapped again.

"'S the old story," Ben Riker told him. "The Masked Hombre left his calling card again, Concho."

Hardy swore, fouling the air with epithets, as he hooked a hand over a walnut gun butt. "If I ever cross the dirty snake's trail—" It was strange coming from him. Though hard-bitten when necessary, he never took the Lord's name in vain and seldom threatened violence. Then he was leaning over Jackson and getting the story from him again.

There wasn't much to tell. Jackson said he had been riding fence down there in the south end. Couldn't hear much with that creosote cramping in the heat over by the butte. Then he had just happened to glance over his shoulder and there was the Masked Hombre, sighting on him with a Winchester over a hummock. Seemed like almost the same instant he spotted the masked face behind the rifle barrel that the bullet ploughed into his leg and he was rocked from the saddle. Then—

"But did you see anything? Did you get a look at him as he fled?" Hardy broke in to demand impatiently. He squeezed Jackson's hand hard as the latter seemed on the verge of slipping into unconsciousness.

Jackson shook his head on the pallet laid out for him in the buckboard. "Just the white mask with the eyeholes in it, boss. It covered his whole head—no sombrero like always."

"But after you fell from your horse?" Hardy prodded.

Jackson shook his head. In falling he had smacked his forehead on a stone and everything had gone around and around for a long time. When he dragged himself back into the saddle, there was just the tattoo of fading hoof-beats off to the west.

CONCHO HARDY stepped back and gave the men in front the signal to head for town. He wiped his forehead with a bandanna, nodded toward his lathered dun cayuse. "Had a hunch there was something wrong as I was coming back from town so I busted the breeze like the devil himself was prodding my tail-bone with a pitchfork. We gotta do something. I—"

Babyface Ogden pushed forward sheepishly, spinning his gray sombrero nervously. He was the newest member of the outfit, taken on to replace Stew Brack, who had been bush-whacked and killed by the Masked Hombre. He was just a half-pint kid with soft brown eyes and a shy way of talking. Came from down Salsito Springs way. "Where some of the best gunslingers in the whole Southwest is born and weaned on cartridge shells for teething rings," he would say.

Wherever he was, whenever he had a few minutes with nothing to do, he was always setting up a can or a piece of stone on a post or a stump and blazing away at it. He was a cross-arm draw gunslinger and the bunkhouse bunch would tell him he was slower than sorghum in January and he would redden up with chagrin. Whenever they called him "Babyface," he would pretend to be sore for a moment.

"I just got figuring how I guess I saw the Masked Hombre myself," he put in diffidently.

Hardy whirled on him as if he had heard a sidewinder sound its warning rattle. "What?" he barked.

Babyface plucked at his hatband as he nodded. "Yep. I was crossing over that south end. Came out on the rimrock on the elbow of that ridge there. I saw this rider heading into one of the draws to the west."

"Yes?" said Hardy, eyes drilling into the kid.

Babyface shrugged. "He had on an old dark coat like Jackson himself wears and I thought it was him. So I didn't pay no more attention. Now I know it must uh been the gent that shot Jackson because I didn't hear any more shots around there."

Concho Hardy seized him by the shoulder. "Why didn't you do something when you heard the first shot?"

Babyface pushed at his yellow hair

and tried to smooth down that cowlick over his forehead. "Well—to tell the truth, I didn't hear it."

"You must of if you was over that way, Babyface!" Harry Main said, mouth bracketed with grim lines. Lew Jackson and he had come to the Bob outfit more than nine years ago together. "You must of."

BABYFACE Ogden bit his under lip, flushing. "Reckon it blended right smack with my shot. You see—a few minutes afore that—I had taken a practice shot at an empty tobacco sack I hung on a sapling. It was blowing some and I wanted to see if I could pick off a small moving target."

Harry Main turned away with an oath and a couple of the men laughed sarcastically. "And you're the wire-tough hairpin who'd like a chance to meet the Masked Hombre face to face!" one of them jeered.

Hardy slammed on his hat and headed for the main house. "This kind of stuff can't go on, boys. I'm going to give it to the Old Man with the bark-off that something's gotta be done."

"If the Old Man was himself, he'd camp on that murderin' buzzard's back-trail himself till Hell froze over to cut his sign," Long Sam Graves said around a straw in his mouth. A couple other men nodded glumly. The Old Man was B. O. Binns, a fire-snorting old-timer who had helped settle the country. As head of the local Vigilantes in his young years, he had whittled down a bunch of rustlers single-handedly till the remnants of the outfit high-tailed it from the country in disgust. But a couple of years ago, Binns had suffered a serious neck injury when thrown by a half-broken horse. Since then he had been confined almost entirely to his room as an invalid.

Somebody sang out. Lannigan was coming over the rise by the windmill. He was a big taciturn man, a good cowhand, but standoffish. He took no back-talk from anybody including the foreman, Hardy. The two had clashed more than once and Lannigan would stick out his underlip at the boss and let him have it back word for word. He was supposed to be some kind of distant relative of the Old Man's.

Concho Hardy stopped and turned around at the horse corral. He waited until Lannigan dropped off in front of the saddle rack at the bunkhouse. Then: "Where you been, Lannigan?"

The big swarthy cowhand walked forward a few steps. He had a jagged scar running down the right side of his face in front of one ear. It gave him a vicious air when he got angry and it turned white.

"I saw the boys taking Jackson into town, Hardy. What're you driving at?" he rumbled as he advanced.

"I'm asking a question, Lannigan. Where you been?"

Lannigan shrugged and tongued away the charred stub of quirley in his mouth. "Took some supplies over to the Rocky Creek line camp," he said sullenly. "Last time I got caught out there in a storm, I found some two-bit sneak had been around and stole all the grub....Took out a sack of beans and some jerked beef and canned stuff. Also left a can of my own tobacco. Now—why?"

Hardy nodded, kicking dust slowly. "Because I'm straw boss here, Lannigan. I give the orders and ask the questions. And any time that you don't like that, you can ask for your time....When you do, mebbeso you and me'll have a little personal argument to settle."

Lannigan's big hand eased rearward until it was near that Colts slung well back on his gunbelt. Then he dropped his hand and put it hard against his trouser leg. "We'll see," he said and went into the bunkhouse.

NOBODY had much to say over the evening meal. Hardy himself ate up at the main house. They just looked at their tin plates as they ate and even forgot to insult the cookee about the grub. Before they had sat down, Dutch Valen, who'd been with the outfit less than six months, had packed his war-bag and gone up to Hardy to get his time and ridden out. He'd had enough. Lew Jackson was the third man he had

seen cut down by this Masked Hombre.

They had no other name for him. Nobody knew who he actually was, in fact. That was what made it so nerve-breaking. They didn't know why he was apparently out to whittle down the Bob spread. They simply knew that he was a man in a white head mask who would bob out of nowhere and cut down a lone rider of the outfit. There was no telling when.

It was about eight months ago he had appeared. Tiny Golsner had ridden in one night more dead than alive and flopped off in front of the bunkhouse. He had a bullet in his body and died before dawn. But before he breathed his last he had told about the white-headed figure that had risen from behind a boulder in the gulch and blasted at him from the right side without a word of warning.

They figured Tiny was some out of his head as he died. But when, a week later, another man reported seeing the man with the white hood with the eye slits in it and showed a bullet-smashed saddle horn to prove it, it was a different matter. With the whole outfit in a bunch, they combed the country for sign of him. But none was found. A few weeks passed.

Then a second man was cut down, though only wounded, as he rode night-hawk on a small round-up herd. He told of seeing the white-masked gent rise from behind a clump of sage just before he got the lead in his hide. Some of the bunch were close at hand and they took out after the dry-gulching raider. Hardy himself, who rode in a few minutes later from the house, joined them and led the hunt till daybreak though he was sick man at the time. And again the trail led to a dead end, petering out.

THAT second victim up and quit the Bob when his wound healed. A deputy sheriff dropped down from the county seat but found nothing. He couldn't squat there forever waiting for this masked sniper to show up.

A tension began to spread through the outfit. Every man knew it was dangerous to ride out on the range alone with this killer a-stalk. A fellow got so he had a constant itchiness between his shoulder blades unless he had them close to a wall. They began to conjecture about it. Somebody said it was the hombre the Old Man had hired a few years ago, then learned was a wanted killer. The Old Man had walked into the bunkhouse, knocked him unconscious with a single blow, then had him trussed up and turned over to the Law. The man had since escaped from State Prison. It might have been him.

White-haired Riker came up with the theory it might be the son of the man who'd owned the outfit to the south more than twenty years ago. He and Binns had had an argument over fence-line and smoked it out face to face up in town one day. The other man had been permanently crippled as a result of his wound and sold out, quit the country. Riker said word had drifted back later of the son getting into a couple of gunfights.

But nobody knew. And nobody knew when he himself would be next. It got so they began to almost wish the Masked Hombre, as they called him for want of something better, would pop up and take his crack at them. There might be a chance for them to crack back, anyway.

And then there was the morning the note was found tacked to the gatepost of the ranchyard. "Will be up in Little Valley tomorrow morning—if any of you Bob coyotes want to drop around," it read in rude printing. And beneath was a rough drawing of a mask. Two more men had asked for their time right away.

But the next night, Concho Hardy led his bunch up to the little valley that branched off like the arm of a "Y" at the north end of the Bob range. They had gone in at dawn, breaking into two bunches to take either side of the stream that snaked down the bottom of the heavily wooded, brush-thick country. They had started to work through. There had been blind spasmodic shooting as men thought they had spotted the Masked

One in the earth-clinging patches of mist. And they had arrived at the other end empty-handed.

"The yella snake never showed—" one man began. And then they realized Stew Brack was not with them. Late that afternoon they found him, using low-circling buzzards as their compass. Stew was dead. Beside him lay a scrap of paper on which he had scrawled a mask and beneath written "white." They all knew what that meant.

BABYFACE OGDEN had been taken with the outfit in his stead. Almost two months had passed. And now the Masked One had struck again.

The coffee pot made a second trip around the oil-cloth covered table and quirleys were lighted up. "It's my opinion," little Babyface started out, "that if we laid a trap for this—this—"

"Trap, hell!" Ben Riker exploded. "We figured we had him trapped in Little Valley that time. But that snaky hairpin seems to know what we're a-going to do ourselves afore we do it. Like he knew Lew Jackson would be down checking the fence on the south end today."

"I'd just like to know who the buzzard is," Harry Main said grimly. "Somehow that would help. I could hate him better. And if I ever do get the chance to meet him face to face—well, he can have two cocked hoglegs covering me—and I'll still draw!"

Lannigan looked at him with an eyebrow raised dubiously across the table. Main was none too fancy getting gun-steel free of holster leather. Main half rose.

"He mightn't be such a stranger after all," Babyface put in eagerly. "He might be somebody from right close, I got a hunch, and—"

"Aw, shut up, button," Sam Long said irritatedly.

Hardy came in. "I talked it over with the Old Man, boys. We're going to bring in a crack man-hunter—and hang the cost. Somebody who'll cut that Masked Hombre's sign and trail him to his hole. And—I've got a hunch I know where I can get hold of Bo McFee."

They began to talk then, excitedly, eagerly. They could see the thing coming to a showdown. This McFee was a crack gunman and a deadly bitter-ender man-hunter. Long Sam knew this yarn about McFee. Main had seen him chop down a cornered fugitive in a Border town one night. They jabbered. All but Babyface Ogden. He sat back and smiled smugly....

They found out why when Bo McFee rode in eight days later. He was a lithe catlike man with a poker face and frosty eyes. He had a trick of watching a man from the corners of them. He didn't appear to know you were there when he shook hands. Yet you felt he would recognize you again if he saw you in a year miles away in different circumstances. He had two Colts with silver skulls inlaid in the butts slung at his blocky hips. And he had two more in an oil-skin wrapped package.

He shook hands with Hardy and asked if they'd had any new trouble. There was a businesslike air about him. Cigar ash flopped on the new black coat of his outfit and he brushed it off with annoyance. Hardy introduced him to the bunkhouse bunch. And Babyface Ogden walked up.

"Howdy, Bo," he said familiarly, chucking out his chest a little as he stole a glance at his fellow hands. "I'm from Salsito Springs, too. I'm Smoky Ogden's boy."

"Oh, sure, sure." McFee took his cigar from his mouth and scowled at where the wrapper had charred. "Yes, I remember you now."

Babyface was cock of the walk. "Say, Bo, remember how my brother, Ralph, and you and me used to play holding up the stage in your pop's barn? You two always made me be the captured passenger because I was so much smaller and younger than you."

McFee smiled tightly. "That's right."

"Ralph was heftier than you. But you could always wrestle him down on the barn floor, couldn't you, Bo?"

McFee nodded. "Always was a right good wrestler," he admitted. "Got anything around here a man can irrigate his tonsils with? I'll be sloping out early to take a look-see over the place. Always like to know the lay of the land."

TWO WEEKS passed and there was no more sign of the Masked Rider. Then Babyface Ogden traipsed in late one night, leading a pony that had lamed itself in a badger hole. He claimed he had met up with the Masked Hombre. Even swore that nick in his shirt sleeve was where a slug of the other had just ticked him.

"And I think I nicked him too," he asserted. "Though there was no bloodstains on the ground when I sneaked forward to where he had been. I had a feeling he was around and there was the snap of a twig just as I dug out my hogleg and twisted in the saddle. And he was stepping around that hummock and—"

The rest of the outfit gave Babyface the laugh. Especially when Hardy came riding up with Bo McFee whom he had met on the way in across the haylands. Concho Hardy said he had been riding the slope a little behind and above Babyface as they combed the brakes for strays. And he had seen nobody. "Heard only one shot," Hardy said. "And I figured that was Babyface training to be a gunman again."

They guffawed right in Babyface's teeth then. He flushed up hotly. "I tell you I saw him—white mask and everything," he insisted. "And I threw down on him like I said I would."

"You just dreamed you saw him," Long Sam told him. "You been thinking so much about him you conjured up yourself a mirage. Could uh tore that hole in your shirt on a twig, boy. Why if you'd dared swap lead with that snake, your hide would be nailed to the fence for drying now."

"I'm a Salsito man!" Babyface came back. "I—"

"In a moment you'll be telling us you're as good as McFee with a smoke pole."

McFee chuckled easily. "The ranny's got nerve, don't you worry. I know his tribe."

Babyface stuck out his chin. "Yeah, even when you wrestled my brother down, he always came back for more, didn't he, Bo?"

"Sure did, fella. He sure did."

The next afternoon, Babyface was sent to town on an errand. When they finished supper in the bunkhouse he had not yet returned. They sat around talking about the kid and how he was always itching to swap lead with the Masked One. It was about taken for granted the latter had pulled stakes. Somehow they felt it in their bones. This McFee had come and the Masked Hombre learned of it and figured he had enough. That would be smart thinking with a gunwolf like McFee dogging your tracks. On top of that, Lew Jackson was coming along pretty well at the doctor's. It would be some time before he would walk again but he hadn't lost the leg. So everybody was feeling pretty good.

NOBODY remembered just who it was who suggested it. "Let's give Babyface a real scare," somebody said. "Then we can hooraw him. He talks a heap. Let's fix it for him to meet the Masked Hombre face to face—only it'll be one of us. It'll be a belly laugh."

They planned it out. "You can do it, Lannigan," Hardy himself said. "You're going up to the Creek tomorra anyway to patch up them winter calf sheds."

So it was fixed up. The next morning, Harry Main came upon the note nailed to a corral pole. He called the rest of them out to see it. It read, above the signature of the mask:

Will Be at the Old Waterhole Tomorrow Morning. Any of You Pack-Rats Got the Nerve to Come Out That Way—

They swapped glances, the outfit keeping their faces straight with an effort. McFee had already gone out to take a pasear over the place. He'd been gone a couple of days. The word was he was getting ready to call it a

job and leave. So he was out of the picture.

"I don't want no piece of that buzzard," Long Sam said.

"Me, neither," old Riker grunted. "I'll go to Boot Hill when the time comes but I ain't yelling for no shovel to dig my own grave."

All eyes focussed on Babyface Ogden. He kept hooking at his gunbelt with a nervous thumb. He looked up at them and dug his teeth into his under lip. Then he nodded once. "I reckon I aim to go."

Early the next morning he rode out, very grim-faced but trying to be calm and keep that under lip from trembling. Long Sam scratched his jaw dubiously. "Mebbe we hadn't ought to let him go."

The rest told him he was crazy. It would be a great joke. Using a flour sack for a mask, Lannigan would go down there and scare the jeans off the kid. Big Lannigan was snake-fast with a smokepole and would jump Babyface easily, then fade out of the picture after spraying some lead near him. It woudn't be difficult to do up there at the Old Waterhole. Down in the core of a small shallow basin, that waterhole had gone dry a few years back. Now the place was deserted, not even visited by the cattle, choked with underbrush and stunted oak.

"I still don't like it," Long Sam said. He wished Concho Hardy was around to order them out to stop Babyface. But the straw boss had gone into town last night and stayed over....

There was no sun that day when Babyface Ogden reined up a short distance from the Old Waterhole. It was overcast, the frowning heavens casting a peculiar yellow-tinged light over the range, and a thin haze hung low over the earth. There was a rawness in the air. Despite himself as he dismounted Babyface shivered. Then he had left his pony hitched to a lone cottonwood and was walking toward the rim of the basin. He didn't mean to be sky-lighted riding in there in the saddle.

His knees felt very stiff and his boots were heavy on his feet. He had already unclipped the spurs from them lest the chains betray him with a telltale rattle. Half crouched, he slid into the brush. It was as dim as twilight there beneath the scrub foliage as he started down the basin side. There was still a faint cowpath meandering down among the strewn boulders toward the old drinking spot. He edged onto it, raking the place with his soft eyes as he raised up minus his sombrero for a look-see. There was nothing save the chirp of a bird, the rustle of a sagehen nearby. Every last leaf seemed frozen.

He went on, lower into the basin, stepping over a fallen limb carefully. It got grayer the further down he went. He had a second gun tucked in his waistband, his holster weapon drawn and gripped. Sweat from his arm rivered down into his palm and made the butt feel slimy. A gust of wind from the plain above dusted the tops of the scrub growth and made the limbs rattle and click. It was a heart-chilling sound and it could cover a stalking dry-gulcher's approach. Babyface half ran on, faster and faster, bent double. He couldn't stand the awful waiting much longer.

THE descending cowpath angled sharply. There was a little hump at the turn that lifted a man up above the rusty foliage. He was up on it, exposed, panting, before he realized it. He flung himself sideward frantically as he sighted the baked crust of the old waterhole ahead. And the winging bullet pinged into a tree trunk just back of the hump.

The crash of the gun report mushroomed over the basin. Babyface Ogden lost his head. He came off his knees and slammed lead twice at that spot where he thought he had seen the flame flash. And a half-hidden gun muzzle frothed burning powder ten yards over to the left at the other side of the dried-up waterhole. The slug tore a chunk out of the brim of the kid's sombrero. He ducked again.

The die was cast. Now on his hands and knees he began to belly-wriggle forward and downward. One of them he knew was not going to leave this basin. The thought made his lips dry

and swallowing hard. Then he found a thin fallen branch. With it he reached over to his left and agitated a small clump of brush twice. The gun down there below spat twice savagely on the stillness. And Babyface swung up one knee and triggered two chunks of lead himself almost in the same instant.

There was a smothered exclamation, the crash of underbrush as a man thrashed backward, from down there. Babyface was surprised to find his fingers steady and deft as he slipped fresh shells into the smoking gun. Then he was worming ahead through the brush quickly. He had forgotten all about fear. His one worry was lest the other escape. He worked closed to the old waterhole, veering to his right.

A thorny vine ripped at his sweat-running face and he recoiled instinctively. The action sent a piece of shale clattering down toward the bottom. Lead spat into the side of the slope about him. And one slug didn't. It took him through the upper left arm, twisting him back against the earth. He locked his teeth against the outcry that stab of pain forced to his throat. He knew the end had to come fast then for he could feel the blood running down inside his shirt sleeve, pulsing from his body.

He eeled around a boulder and saw the sombrero apparently just rise from behind a fringe of brush feet back from the baked clay of the bottom of the pit. He was up and stabbing spurts of lead at it from his gun. Too late he realized his blunder. The Masked Hombre wore no hat when he struck. Two shots lashed up the slope at him, bracketing his head and practically whispering in his ears as they passed. They came from the left of the hat propped on the bush.

Flinging himself to the right, still dizzy from the wound in his arm, Babyface tripped and went a-sprawl. A stick of brush cracked under him. And the jagged stub ripped through his shirt and gored him wickedly in the side of the chest, splintering into his flesh. It was more painful than dangerous. But a scream burst from him in panic before he knew what it was.

He scrambled ahead, afraid the scream might have given his location to that deadly marksman across the mud crust. Then, before he knew it, he was out in the open in a bare spot near the end of the waterhole. But so was his assailant, swinging out from the fringe of scrub growth in full sight, faceless behind the white head mask.

From the kid's scream he thought he had mortally wounded him, crippled him at least. He had come out to finish him. Babyface leaped up, going chalky about his taut-stretched mouth. This was it, the showdown. And there was something ghastly, direful about that faceless mask with the slitted apertures for eye holes. Somehow it was like going up against an inhuman thing, something almost bodiless.

Then dust from the hard-baked mud was furrowed up where Babyface's left heel had been. Babyface triggered, peering through the smoke that drifted before his enemy. The latter tried to dart sideward as he worked two weapons now. But the desperate kid zigzagged through the fire across the caked surface and cut him off with a shot that lopped off a low limb just feet ahead of him. The next moment, Babyface's wounded left arm was gashed open afresh.

There was no more fencing, no more maneuvering. The Masked Hombre stood with thin legs widespread, riding those triggers. And little Babyface knifed toward him. His gun clicked empty. But the Masked Hombre was on one knee, hit in the leg. There was a split second with the gun reports waning as they boiled from the hollow. Babyface sliced his right arm across his body for the cross-arm draw on the gun in his waistband, butt forward. The other recovered from his fall and levered up both weapons. Three guns thundered in unison and kept a-roar as both men pumped bullets.

BABYFACE swayed, a tanned cheek ripped to the bone. But he kept his feet and steadied his gun

again. The last wasn't necessary. The Masked Hombre was going down. One of his guns had slipped from his gloved fingers. He was weaving, moving in a rough circle, with little faltering steps. Then he almost went over backward, jack-knifed forward. He made a feeble effort to clamp a hand to the hole in his chest. And then he was down, hitting the baked mud with a flat smack, second gun bouncing away from him. He rolled on his back and was still.

Babyface went forward and bent over him and flipped back the mask. Babyface didn't seem too surprised even though it was Bo McFee. He started to shake a little now that the tension eased.

A gunshot snapped it back taut again. Babyface was cool now. He dropped to his knees. Then there was another, ripping into the dry stuff across the mud-hole. Whipping around, Babyface came up and lunged into the brush at where he had seen that last flame slash. There was a fleeting glimpse of a white mask ducking through the trees, another Masked Hombre. Babyface steadied his gun over a low bough and fired with his ebbing strength.

The white-masked one ducking up the slope spun around and fell. Then Babyface heard him scrambling through the brush. He tried to run forward, got a split-second sight of the one ahead hobbling around the edge of a boulder. Babyface triggered but the firing pin rapped down on an empty shell. He sank to his knees from weakness and a little later heard retreating hoofbeats as the second masked one departed....

BACK at the Bob bunkhouse, they were getting anxious. It was well after midday and the seriousness of the practical joke they had plotted began to sink in. Everybody was wishing Hardy would get back from town but he had failed to appear yet.

Then Main let out a yell and pointed. Babyface had appeared coming through the Spanish bayonet stalks down where the seep spring was. He swayed slightly in the saddle and they could see his left arm was crudely bandaged up. They clustered about him as he rode into the ranchyard, helping him down.

"Holy Gawd!" Long Sam said reverently and ran to get the pint of redeye from beneath his bunk.

"I got him—the Masked Hombre," Babyface started. Then his voice broke, drying out in his throat.

"You—you mean you killed Lannigan?" Harry Main asked.

They worked some redeye down Babyface's throat and he shook his head after he swallowed. "N-no. 'Tweren't Lanny. It was that Bo McFee—or the gent who was calling himself Bo McFee. . . I smoked it out with him and he's dead back there."

Nobody understood. Ben Riker took charge. "It must uh been Lannigan you shot, kid. Not McFee. He's plumb hell-fire on them triggers. You see—as a sort of practical joke, we had it fixed for Lannigan to go out there and put on a white mask and scare the—"

But Babyface shook his head stubbornly as they led him to the bench before the bunkhouse. "It was McFee. I lifted the mask after I downed him. It was him. Or the gent using his name. Because that wasn't Bo McFee—as I knew from the first."

"What?"

"Yep. Couldn't tell by his looks 'cause I hadn't seen him in more than ten years. But you remember how I said how he used to be able to wrestle my brother, Ralph, down, even though Ralph was bigger? Well, it was the other way around. Ralph's even smaller than me. But he could always down Bo in the old days. When this fake McFee agrees as to how he downed Ralph, I knew he was a sham."

One of the men whistled softly. They all regarded Babyface with new respect. And then Lannigan rode around the corner of the bunkhouse. And in the saddle of the horse beside him, Lannigan's throw-rope noosed about his neck, was Concho Hardy.

Concho was a pretty banged-up hombre. Two of his front teeth were missing and his lips were mashed. He had a wounded leg. And when

they lifted him out of the saddle, they saw that his shirt had been cut to ribbons and his back was a mass of welts and slashes. The dour-faced Lannigan got down too and unhooked his gunbelt and handed it to old Ben Riker.

"Take it, Ben. I reckon you'll be running this outfit next. . . I'm giving myself up. I got a little confession to make, then you can take me in and turn me over to the law. Hardy'll back up all what I got to say—and sign a written statement of it afterward or—well, I can convince him." He dangled a looped-up pigging string that was soiled with dried blood.

Nobody knew what to say.

"Yeah, I'm a distant nephew of the Old Man's. I got mixed up in a nasty shooting ruckus and came over here to lie low. After I'm finished, I'll go back and face the charges. . . But Mr. Hardy here learned about that shooting matter. And he proceeded to hold it over me. Then he got an idee on how to get the Old Man sick of trying to run the place and go East to a doctor, leaving me—and Hardy—to run it. Hardy has some slick idees about rustling. Ain't you, Hardy?" Lannigan edged over.

"Uh—yes," Hardy said quickly.

"I been a damn fool—but I had to go along with Hardy on his plan because of what he held over me. I didn't mean for anybody to get killed. You see, Hardy's idea was the Masked Hombre. . . He was him."

LANNIGAN told the rest tonelessly. It had been Hardy who had gunned Tiny Golsner and Stew Brack and Lew Jackson and the other one. When Lannigan told it, it seemed so obvious. The foreman was never with the rest of the bunch when a shooting happened, always off by himself on some pretext.

"That right, Hardy?" Lannigan growled. Hardy nodded again.

"Well, that's it, gents. The Old Man began to suspect Hardy was pulling something. So to avert suspicion from himself, Concho got smart and hired this McFee to come in to try and clean up things. But McFee caught onto the game when Hardy tried to drill Babyface out on the trail a coupla weeks ago. McFee saw him and declared himself in on the game, there being no real Masked Hombre. Hardy told me at the time."

The rest was evident. Concho Hardy had used the boys' practical joke, suggested by himself to bait a double trap. He was afraid Babyface guessed too much. And he wanted McFee out of the picture.

"When I got up and found somebody had set my pony loose out at the camp this morning, I knew something was up. I finally tracked him down but got to the Old Waterhole after it was over."

The way Hardy had cooked it, McFee, wearing a white mask was to take care of Babyface Ogden. And then Hardy had planned to get McFee himself from behind. Only it hadn't paid off that way. Lannigan had overtaken the wounded Hardy as he fled the scene and taken him back for a look.

"And—and Babyface really burned down McFee?" Harry Main asked, still hazy.

Lannigan nodded grimly. "Better get out for him with a wagon afore the coyotes tear him to pieces. He's dead."

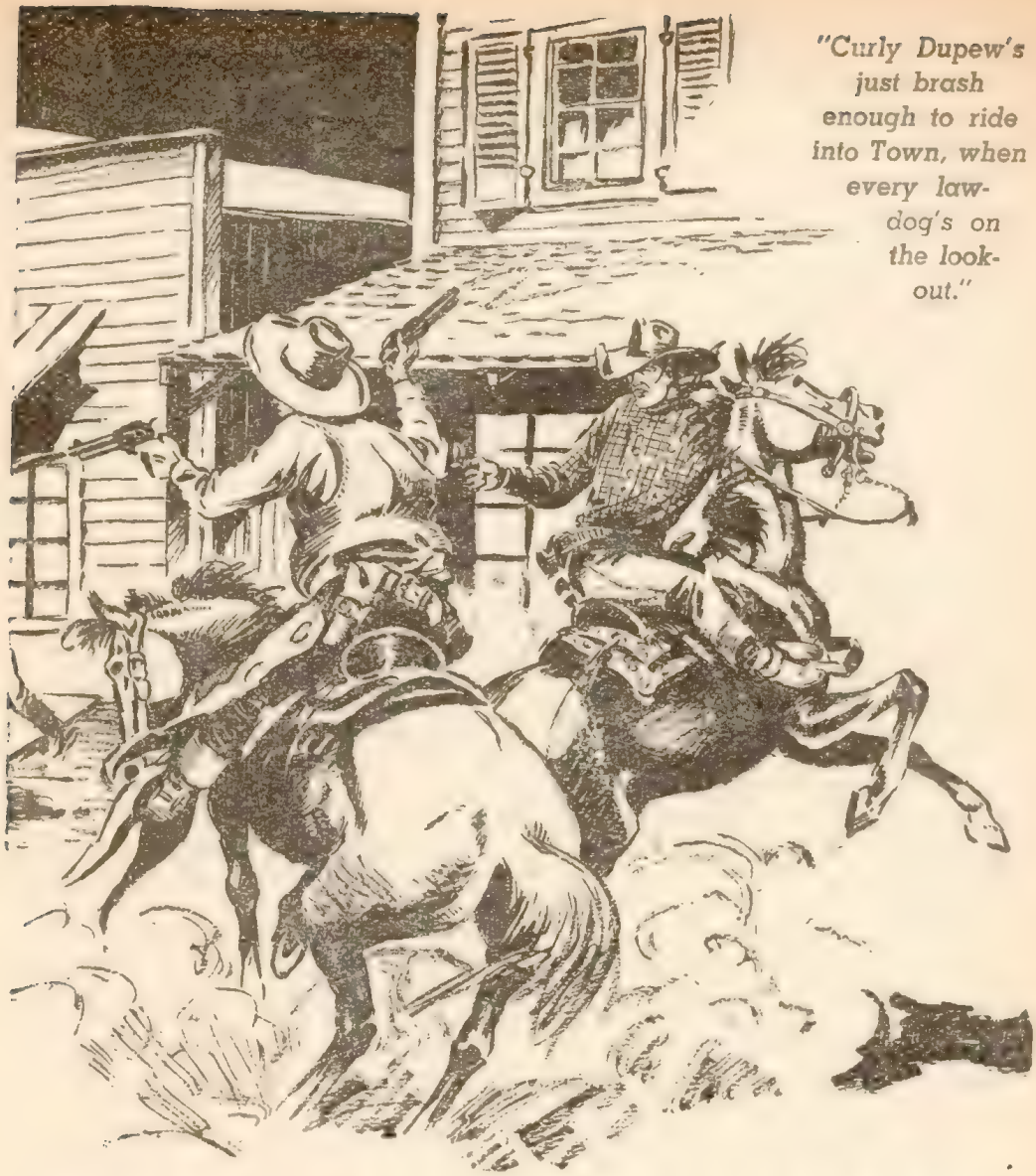
"Well, over Salsito Springs, we turn out real gun-slingers," Babyface said with feigned nonchalance. "Of course, it wasn't the real McFee. But if it had been—"

McFee's body had been brought in and they were still gabbing about it when the U. S. marshal rode up.

"That's him all right," the marshal said when he saw the body. "I saw him not more than four months ago, so I know. You see, McFee got wounded in the head about a year ago. He couldn't remember a thing about his past afterward. And then he started to go a little funny—started to play 'em crooked. Whoever burned down this snake done one hell of a good day's work!"

Babyface Ogden met the marshal's slap on the back with a sickly grin and started to sway. "The—the real McFee," he muttered.

THE END



"Curly Dupew's just brash enough to ride into Town, when every law-dog's on the look-out."

BAIT FOR A COYOTE

By Cliff Campbell

"What is our Sheriff, Jos Taggare, doing about Curly Dupew? Nothing! Just plumb absolutely nothing, except tackin' up reward notices all over the country. And the descriptions of Dupew on them notices are downright false!"

IT WAS an ugly moment. The tall bony-beaked hombre at the bar had been waving his arms dramatically as he proclaimed that there was something lacking in the way of nerve with a law officer who didn't take the trail of a lobo. Especially one who had just struck in his piece of country.

"What I say is this," the tall man

had just cried ringingly. "That Curly Dupew held up the stage down the line here from Muffree. Shot up two passengers bad and wounded a deputy as they makes their getaway with the loot. And what does Taggare, your sheriff, do? Nothing! Just plumb absolute nothing—'cept for tacking up a heap of reward handbills around the country. 'S all! Now—I say if a John Law ain't got the nerve to go out and hunt down a coyote like that, why—"

And then there was Sheriff Jos Taggare himself in the doorway of the Red Sombrero. He came walking in, a gaunt slab of sleepy-eyed man with big red hands dangling from his shirt sleeves. He was young but the set of his mouth and the deep-rooted poise about him were that of a wire-tough veteran. The tall orator took one look and became very interested in his half empty glass, whistling off key. Taggare walked unhurriedly up to him, a quizzical smile in his eyes.

"Mister," he said in that throaty voice, "you're just the kind of a gent I'm looking for. Yes-siree."

The tall man looked around, half chagrined and half suspicious. Smiled weakly. "Say, sheriff, I was just thinking out loud and—"

Taggare, who was known to be a heap tough, who had laid out more than one man for a careless remark with a right fist like a chunk of iron, patted the tall one on the back. "You're absolutely right, fella. I agree with you. We ought to stage a man-hunt for Dupew that would end up by driving him outa the country—or with him swinging on the end of a rope."

The tall one gathered courage. "Well now, sheriff, that is what I was just saying and—"

Taggare patted him again. "Sure ....of course, you know as well as I do that Dupew is one of the greatest gunfighters who ever thumbed cartridges into a gun. Lightning fast, tricky, and a cold-blooded as a wolf."

"Yes, that's right. He oughta be killed and—"

"And, of course, you know the kind of a bunch he's got riding under him. Some of the best men who ever came down the owlhoot trail. Dead shots and reckless as the devil. All of 'em have smelled plenty of gun-smoke. Dupew only gets the best because of his rep. And you know how his men have incredible confidence in him. They don't believe he ever can be caught. Why they think he's danged near bullet-proof. And he's convinced 'em of that by his nerve of riding right into a hornet's nest where they're looking for him. Like that time he went in and complained about a fake hold-up to the marshal up at Twin Rivers ....And a big outfit too—better than twenty men."

"YES—uh—that's right," said the tall one. "Yep."

"Tough outfit...." Taggare built a quirly thoughtfully. "I'd like to get after 'em....Now, me, I had four deputies. Three now with one of 'em laid up with a busted leg following that stage hold-up. Three and me."

"Well-l—" the tall one stalled.

"So I try to get up a posse to go into that rough Yellow Hills country after Dupew and his bunch. Ask for volunteers. Four men step up and offer to ride with me. Four. And one of 'em's old Pop Canby who can't see ten feet ahead of him. I—" The sheriff broke off to put a match to his cigaret. "'Course, that's bad country. A posse could ride into an ambush there and be wiped out in a few minutes....Me, my three deputies, and four men ain't many."

"Well—uh—no-o," the other admitted, eyes shifty now.

Taggare gave him a clap on the back that bent him halfway over the bar counter. "So we'll be danged pleased to have a fire-eating rip-snorting gent like you riding with us when we go out after Dupew. You'll make nine of us—against twenty odd of them. Now you just come down to my office and sign up and—"

The tall one gulped and flushed up and shuffled his feet. "Well—uh—sheriff—you—uh—see the point

is, I—I got some danged important business down the line. I'd sure like to ride with you. But, as a matter of fact, I got to be hitting the trail right now. Uh—I—"

He headed doorward followed by snickers and guffaws and mocking whistles. "Where's your nerve, mister? Did it run off at your mouth?" they called after him.

But it was short-lived. Taggare looked around, had himself a quick snort of redeye, and left. The owner of the feed store nodded.

"Sure Dupew's tough and ornery," he said. "We all know that. But we elected Taggare and we're paying him a salary to take care of hombres like that. It's his duty. Maybe it's damn dangerous sometimes but—"

"Did you sign up for the posse, Brown?" somebody asked.

The feed store man spat tobacco juice. "No—and I ain't claiming to be no lawman, either. That's Taggare's job! Now I say—"

"If they could just get Dupew himself—it would break up that bunch!" another man put in. "Two-three years back he was in jail for a coupla months before he escaped—and his outfit fell apart and busted up."

"That's it," some others chimed in. "The sheriff ought to try and get Dupew! That would do it."

"He's been dropping a hint or two that he aimed to," the proprietor of the Red Sombrero said.

"HINTS are cheap," Bow Lucas sneered down at the end of the bar. Bow was one of the sheriff's deputies, an experienced old-timer who had hoped to be put up as sheriff himself at the last election. "What I figure is that Taggare's gone a little loco. He's got those reward handbills 'bout Dupew stuck all around the country and—"

"That's all he has done," a listener snapped.

"Them handbills is just the point," Lucas said. He turned and went over to one tacked to the wall and ran a gnarled finger along the lines of print describing the wanted man. "Says here, 'five foot ten in height.' And here, 'clean shaven with black hair and dark eyes.' And then here it says as how he is bow-legged."

"Well," said the Red Sombrero boss, "few folks ever have got a good look at Dupew—not when they knew it wah him, anyways. The Law ain't even got a picture of him."

"All right," the deputy admitted. "But we got a look at him at the stage hold-up the other night, Jos Taggare included. The moon was danged bright. And Dupew's mask slipped when he had a horse shot from under him and stood in the middle of the road triggering. We saw him. Good and plain."

"Yes?"

"Well, Dupew is a good six foot and better. He ain't clean-shaven—he's got a black mustache. And as far as being bow-legged—he's as

He was a high-class hurler, with a veneration for screwballs, this gent they dubbed "Mr. Whacko." And not only would he spend hours of research on the various screwballs in baseball history, but he couldn't rest until he'd tried each and every one of their zany tricks himself. But the payoff came when he stumbled on a system of making base hits by reading the opposing hurler's mind!!!

DON'T MISS
"MR. WHACKO COMES THROUGH"
by ERIC ROBER

SPORTS FICTION
Spring Issue Now On Sale

straight-legged as a young colt. You don't have to take my word for it. Joe," he named Joe Shot, the deputy who had been wounded, "saw Curly Dupew coupla years ago. It was before Joe came down here to be a deputy. He was sitting less than ten feet from him in a dance-hall. Joe'll back up everything I say. More than that, Joe says Dupew's got light blue eyes and his hair is shot with silver. So there you are!" Bow Lucas lifted a drink.

"You mean—you mean that description of him on the handbill is all wrong?" one man demanded.

"Exactly," Lucas said. And several others along the bar nodded. "It's locoed, plumb locoed! I told Taggare. But he won't change it."

"I heard that too," a man said. There had been rumors of it floating about Muffree. Lying in bed over at the boarding house, Joe Shot had told it to a few friends. One of the stage passengers had insisted she saw the leader's black mustache during the hold-up. Men shook their heads. A few cursed Taggare for being such a stubborn lunkhead.

"All I know," said the boss of the Red Sombrero, "is that Taggare allows as how he hopes for that handbill to trap Curly Dupew...."

BY AFTERNOON, they were saying Joe Taggare was crazy around Muffree. The tide of feeling rose against him. Even the cooler-headed ones, while admitting he lacked a big enough posse to comb the hills for Dupew, said it was pretty bad about not getting a reward handbill straight.

Then that small rancher from Pritchard Creek came in and told about having his whole remuda run off by the Dupew bunch last night. They had shot up his one cowhand too. He hadn't gotten a look at the lobo chief.

"What good would it have done him?" was the general opinion. "He could uh read the reward poster till he was black in the face—and he wouldn't have recognized Dupew from that description if he had seen him."

"Dupew must be laughing fit to be tied," they said along the busy streets. "Knows he's as safe as a bug in a blanket....He'll be pulling one of those bold moves of his right pronto to show his contempt for the Law. Damn Jos Taggare!"

Knots of men began to form in stores and on corners. There was talk of setting up a Vigilante Committee to run things. Bow Lucas' friends hinted he would be a good man to head it. Why before you'd know it, that swell-headed Dupew might come riding into town.

"And Jos Taggare wouldn't know him when he saw him!" a Lucas backer asserted. He dropped his voice quickly as Sheriff Taggare came up the road, nodding cordially, the shadow of a knowing smile on his severe mouth. He went up onto the little porch of the jail-house and sat down and began to clean one of his guns. The sun got closer to the saw-toothed hills in the west.

A couple of orey-eyed riders came down the trail from the south, wrangled some in front of the Red Sombrero. Taggare stood up on the porch to watch them. They made up, twined arms, and went into the bar-room. In the bit of excitement, nobody noticed the two horsemen who drifted in on the road from the east, passed down a side street, and turned into the main street leading their ponies. One of them was slim, tall, with a droopy-brimmed sombrero yanked low over his face. The pair went into the General Store and bought some tobacco and shells. The slim one argued with the store-keeper, claiming he was overcharging him.

"If you don't like my prices," snapped Bartell, the store owner, "go somewhere's else, stranger! I didn't ask you to come in here. But I can always ask you to git the blazes out!" He was an independent cuss, that Bartell.

THE slim one and his big-boned companion left peacefully though chuckling strangely. Crossing the street, they went into one of Muffree's smaller bars, had a couple of

drinks, bought cigars including one for the bartender. They came out and got talking to a hairpin lounging at the hitch-rack.

"Hear there was a hold-up down the trail from here," the tall slim one said. "Some two-bit outlaw, I suppose."

The townsman shook his head. "Nope, it was that Curly Dupew. Nothin' two-bit about him. He's plain walking hell with a six-gun and a nervy hombre in the bargain."

"Aw, most of them badmen are wind-bellied tinhorns," the slim stranger said, teetering on his long thin legs as he pulled off his hat and brushed dust from it. "I'd like to meet up with him just once!"

"The privilege can be all yours, mister."

Over on the porch of the jail-house, Jos Taggare got up and went inside, slamming the door loudly after him. The newcomers ambled on down the road, left their ponies ground-anchored beneath the big cottonwood down from the Red Sombrero, and entered the latter. Nobody noticed Jos Taggare leave the jail by the back door and ease around out to the road through an alley. Shadows were tonguing out from the buildings on the west side of the street and Taggare drifted along through them. He reached the Sombrero and went down to a side door and stepped inside. The swamper was already lighting up the coal oil lamps in there.

The man Taggare sought, the tall slim newcomer with the bony pardner, was at the head of the bar, back against the front wall of the place. "Yeah," he was saying to Purvis, the blacksmith, "what I hate more 'n anything else is a horsethief! One of those coyotes stole the sweetest little claybank mare I had once. If I ever cut that gent's sign—well, he'll have a claim in Boot Hill staked out for him before he can spit twice." The tall one lifted his drink of redeye to his mouth. Then, over its rim, he saw the gaunt sleepy-eyed man with the lawman's star on his vest standing halfway down the room.

It was Jos Taggare. He stood, legs spread, red hands hooked in his shell belt, staring right at the slim newcomer. The latter's eyes slitted up a moment. He swallowed his drink and picked up his cigar and blew out a cloud of bluish smoke. "Yep, I plumb hate horse-thieves." Then he looked again to where Taggare stood. And the sheriff was still staring unblinkingly and unswervingly right at him.

A COUPLE of others felt the tension and looked around at Taggare. He said nothing, just staring. The slim man laughed loudly at something, dropping a hand out of sight below the bar to his gunbelt. Taggare's fingers flexed. The other suddenly shoved his change at the bartender.

"Buy yourself a ranch, mister. I got to be sloping along. I—I'll be

ANOTHER NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL
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dropping in in a coupla days." The slim hombre nudged his partner. They moved along the front wall toward the door, both covering the whole barroom with their side-twisted eyes. They snapped themselves through the door. Taggare was over there in a couple of leaps, breasting them before they stopped swinging.

The tall slim man was a few yards from his pony under the tree. His companion had a foot in the stirrup. "All right, Curly," the sheriff called. "Fill your hand!"

"Curly? Curly Dupew?" a man across the road cried as he saw the sheriff in the doorway of the Red Sombrero with a hand vised around a gun butt. "Why—"

Then a window in the boarding house across the street slammed up and the wounded deputy, Joe Shot, stabbed out an arm to point at the tall slim one. "That's him—Dupew! That's him!"

It happened swiftly. The tall slim one, Dupew, slapped his hat back on his shoulders as he ripped gun steel up from his holster. You could see his spike of mustache now and his black head shot with silver. He was well over six feet, straight-legged. He flung toward a post as he cocked the trigger. And his partner in the saddle snap shot a burst of lead at the sheriff.

But Taggare's gun had already spoken, a split second before. The one in the saddle toppled slowly as he clawed at his chest, finally sliding off to fold up in the dust. Dupew's guns blasted from behind the post. But Jos Taggare had leaped down the steps of the Sombrero and dropped to his knees on the wooden sidewalk, a second Colts out. Both of them frothed flame flash. Bits of wood leaped from the post shielding Dupew and he swore as one slug nicked his arm.

Then he darted over toward the steps of a store, shooting. A slug of his, caroming off the ground, caught the sheriff in the leg. He stumbled momentarily and men behind doors and windows held their breath. Then he straightened and came on. But Dupew had made the porch of the place and dropped behind the solid railing. One of his gun noses jerked into sight and spat lead twice. Taggare weaved as he charged and kept closing in.

It looked like suicide. Shifting down a few feet as he was hidden from view, Dupew bobbed up again to trigger. Jos Taggare fired from the hip. And the lobo ducked from sight frantically, a hole through his hat crown. And his nerve went. He lunged back to get in the door of the place.

One of the sheriff's slugs spattered to bits the knob he reached for. Curly Dupew swung about, cornered. He cursed between set teeth and then slid forward and slung lead. The watchers saw one chunk open up the flesh of Taggare's right cheek. But with an inexorable determination, the lawman walked right in. His two weapons crashed thunder. Dupew seemed to be lifted onto his toes, smoking hoglegs sagging. And then he plunged down the steps, his head smashing hard. It left a bloody track behind it from the ragged hole in the center of his forehead. He was dead....

THE boss of the Sombrero set up drinks on the house and Bow Lucas held a match to the patched-up Taggare's cigar and patted him on the back. "You said you figured those handbills might trap him, sheriff. But I don't git that yet?" Purvis the blacksmith said.

Jos Taggare smiled faintly. "They did, though. I knew Dupew was one heap of a showoff. He liked to show he never was afeared of the Law. So I put out that handbill with a false description of him on purpose. I figured that if he thought we didn't know what he really looked like—well, he might try his old trick of riding plumb back into the hornets nest so's he could boast of it afterward....He did."

"But he ain't going to do much boasting," said the boss of the Sombrero.

THE END

"McQuade longriders have the Town sewed up."

GUN BREED

"Consider what they done in El Paso, Mr. Mayor. They chose Dallas Stoudenmire, and when he was killed, John Selman. Both those gents were killers. Abilene had Hickock. Dodge City had Bat Materson and Wyatt Earp. We got to pitch against this bunch here a man as deadly as themselves!"

SLOWLY, the big pine box went down. Around the long narrow hole men's boots plowed up mud as wet ropes slid through calloused hands. Above the hiss of the cold drizzle the little gray-haired circuit rider's voice lifted in its sonorous ". . . True to his trust—may God rest his soul. . ." Then spades filled the hole and the slender cortege rolled back to town.

By Glenn Shirley

The slickered youth stood alone on the clay hill. Billy Colohan was scarcely out of his teens, still had fuzz on his face. But he boasted the full body of a man, and was as tough as they had come up the Trail to take the town his dad had tried to tame. Now old Zeke Colohan rested in boothill, shot from ambush while going out to quell a brawl.

Billy stared down at the muddy mound and his big bare fists doubled into white knots of steel.

"Never even give you the warnin' a rattlesnake gives, damn their souls!" he cried.

Tears rolled down his cheeks with the rain. His slickered figure, like the ghost of death, moved down the slope toward Black Dog town and turned up Empire Street.

The fall election was on hand. Overhead, painted banners dripped water, and from saloon fronts all along the way big posters glared Sherman McQuade's candidacy for mayor. The wealthy owner of the Texas House, where old Zeke was heading the night he had died, was out to beat Hank Rizdale.

Rizdale had appointed Zeke marshal when first elected two years before. In a final effort to clean out the Black Dog element before the coming election, old Zeke had issued an edict that every undesirable found in town after a certain date would answer to him personally.

These bits of information Billy had picked up at the funeral. He saw that edict now as he strode past it, plastered against the front of Nate Fete's hardware store, full of bullet holes and smeared with tobacco juice and mud.

His mouth like a seam in a slab of granite, he turned in at the town hall, crowded now with serious-faced men. Up in front Rizdale faced councilmen Fete and Til Costner. At his side stood eighteen-year-old Laura. Her brown eyes snapped. Her lithe, crinoline-clad figure was straight as a string. It seemed to Billy that, standing there beside her father, she gave him the strength he needed to carry on his fight. Lean and rawboned, haggard, the mayor came to the edge of the platform.

"Gentlemen!" he said. "I alone have the power to appoint another marshal of Black Dog, and I won't sanction a known gunman taking over old Zeke's law badge. Not even his own son."

"Wait, Rizdale!" Fete's voice cracked like a pistol shot. "First what they done in El Paso. They chose Dallas Stoudenmire, and when he was killed, John Selman. Both were killers. Abilene had Hickok. Dodge City had Bat Materson, Wyatt Earp, Nixon, Short. Pit against the bunch here a man more deadly than themselves. Appoint Billy Colohan!"

Prominent in his fight for Black Dog cleanliness, Fete came out of his chair and planted himself before Rizdale. "Old Zeke was my friend," he went on. "A better officer never set his face against the hellishness of the wicked. Sure his boy got too promiscuous with his hardware and had to skip to keep from havin' a run-in with his own dad. And it's a fact that men have died before his guns. But has it been shown in any case where he didn't stand for law and order and killed only in self-defense! Give this boy the badge, Rizdale."

"I'm a damned fool to pin it on you, Billy Colohan."

The mayor faced the boy on the platform. Billy sneered. He looked down at the tarnished star on his vest and took an oath to marshal this uncurried neck of hell.

LAURA congratulated him, her brown eyes very large in an utterly still face.

"I hurried when I got your letter," he drawled softly, but the bitterness never left his darkly tanned face.

As he strode up the sidewalk toward his office, he grimly studied the dirty second-story window of a vacant building next to Sherman McQuade's Texas House. He noticed that it commanded full view of the marshal's office and the length of Empire Street. He thought over how his dad had been killed, and

what the doc had said about the way the bullet had ranged downward through his dad's chest, as if it had been fired from about such a height.

That evening, when the rain had ceased and the crowd had dispersed, Rizdale, Fete and Costner met behind closed doors. They listened to Billy talk and passed an ordinance for disarmament. From that day, gun-toting in Black Dog was illegal.

The news swept town like a grass fire. Down at the Texas House, Buck Kells tossed back his big head and laughed. In a loud voice he announced that no damned city council was going to tell him what he couldn't do. He threw down another fiery drink and swaggered into Empire Street, garnished with twin revolvers and his spurred boots spatting up geysers of water and mud.

Half a block away, Billy Colohan stepped from his office. Kells' bloodshot eyes took on a glitter and his thick lips peeled in a yellow-toothed snarl. He cut straight across the rutted roadway for the marshal.

Billy walked to meet him. "Kells," he said, "shuck them irons."

The gunman jerked to a stop, amazed that the marshal hadn't gone for his weapons without preliminaries.

"What's to keep me from blowin' you to hell instead, tinbadge?" he bellowed.

"Nothing," Billy called, his eyes twin slits of blue ice, "unless you know that I can put a slug through your carcass before you can even wrap a hand around a gun butt. Shuck them irons!"

Billy was still walking toward him, only a few yards away. Kells wanted to draw, but somehow his nerve had gone. He gawked owlishly like a man drunk as he unbuckled his revolvers and let them plop into the mud.

"Go back and tell McQuade it didn't work," said Billy. "Tell him it is the law, and that if I catch any more of his hirelings wearing a gun in Black Dog, I'll shoot on sight."

He waited until Kells had gone back to the Texas House. Then he strode back to the sidewalk, carrying the gunman's artillery. Citizens on both sides of the street gaped. He was conscious of everyone's eyes upon him, but as he strode toward his office he was watching the dirty second-story window of the building next to the Texas House. Nothing happened, but the town was so still his bootsteps echoed on the wooden walk like the thump of drums. Plainly, he had drawn cards in a grim little game of death.

He heard running feet behind him and whirled. But it was only Laura Rizdale. Her soft hair whipped in the breeze. Her eyes flashed excitedly.

"It was wonderful, Billy," she blurted, softly. "I told them you could do it."

Billy looked at her sharply. "What you mean?"

The girl's face flushed. "I—I did it, Billy. I talked Mister Fete into persuading Dad to hire you."

Billy's eyes flashed. His mouth opened, but he shut it to keep from saying something he might be sorry for. Here was the girl who had torn herself from his arms the night he had ridden away from Black Dog—the girl who had taken away hot, impulsive lips and said his killer guns would always be between them. Now she had asked that those guns protect her father in his fight against Black Dog's rottenness, just as Zeke Colohan had been used a month before and killed with a bullet from a bushwhacker's pistol.

BILLY'S face turned bleak. "Your father, Laura—does he have a chance to be re-elected? The town's plastered with McQuade."

"Only a lot of display," she said. "There's still enough decent citizens to elect Dad—if he lives."

Billy frowned. "If he lives?"

"Dad was shot at the night your father was murdered," explained Laura. "He was shot at again last night."

"Looks like somebody's got a high and mighty reason for havin' him bumped off. . ." began Billy. "Look out, Laura!"

He lunged forward into the girl, knocking her aside. A gun crashed from across the street, and lead splintered the door facing inches from where their heads had been.

Billy whipped out a revolver and ran for the vacant building. He noted with keen interest that the second-story window now gaped open.

He smashed through the front door, and slid cautiously up a dusty stairway to the second floor. But the place was empty. An open window in the rear showed Billy where the ambusher had made his getaway onto the roof.

But how had he disappeared so quickly? Where had he gone from there?

Puzzled, Billy walked back to the jail. Men surrounded him in a milling, excited throng. Mayor Rizdale elbowed through, his lean face gray.

"My Gawd, what happened, boy?"

"The same gent who didn't like Dad don't like me," Billy said with a frozen grin. "Whoever it was, he got away."

After supper Billy stood at the window of his office. The room behind him was in total darkness. Through narrowed eyes he studied the vacant building across the street. Now he noticed that the back of the roof extended in such a way that a man escaping through that rear window could easily have crossed and disappeared into one of the windows in the upper story of the Texas House.

Billy drew the blind and turned to light the lamp on his desk. Suddenly, a gun crashed the night outside.

Whirling, Billy ripped up the shade. He gasped as he saw a dark figure leap from the roof of the vacant building and disappear through a window of the Texas House.

Had the man been waiting up there for him to light that lamp? Then why had he fired that shot?

A knock sounded at the door. Billy swung around, hand clamping a gun butt.

"Who's there?" he barked.

"Rizdale," came the mayor's voice. "Got to see you, boy—quick!"

Billy lifted the bar and whipped open the door. Moonlight poured in on him. Rizdale stood there tottering, his face as white as paper and a wild light in his eyes.

"I was a damned fool to pin that badge on you," he repeated. "I was heading for the Texas House—didn't want to see you shot from ambush like your dad—"

His eyes rolled in their sockets and Billy caught him as he fell forward. The hand he pressed to the old man's breast came away, sticky wet.

He lifted the body to a cot. In a shaft of moonlight he gazed somberly down at the gray-haired mayor who had legalized his killer guns. ". . . Heading for the Texas House—didn't want you to be shot from ambush like your dad. . ." Those words sang in Billy's brain. Unconsciously his fingers clenched the walnut butts of his twin guns.

He heard someone running up the walk. He waited tensely, sighed with relief as Laura burst into the room.

She uttered a startled exclamation as she saw her father's body. She threw herself on her knees beside the cot, lips quivering as she fought back a great outburst of tears.

"He was heading for the Texas House, Laura," Billy's mouth warped in bitter rage. "You got me hired to fight his own private war, but now I'm drawin' cards for the whole town!"

"Billy, you mustn't!"

She leaped to her feet, blocking the doorway. Her face was pale. Her breath came fast.

"I wanted you appointed because it was the only way to prove that Black Dog needed your guns," she cried. "If you go down there, they'll kill you!"

MIXED emotions crowded Billy's breast. He wanted to say something, but words choked his throat. He whirled and strode into the night.

He looked back once and saw Laura standing in the doorway, sobbing. Billy winced. His guns were fast. No man had ever beat them. But tonight there would be many opponents. . .

Strong fingers pulled at his reason, but he pictured an old man on a cold clay hill with the rain beating down in his face, and somehow the prospect of going up against the Black Dog element failed to swerve him.

Fete and Costner came hurrying up the walk. They had heard the shot and were on their way to investigate. Billy talked to them a minute. In the end they shifted their guns to the fore of their legs and followed him up Empire Street to the Texas House.

When Billy shoved back the double doors and Fete and Costner heeled him in, an utter hush dropped over the vast barroom. The crowd fell away from either side of a tall, thin man wearing a white shirt and black string tie, fancy boots, Stetson hat and striped pants with a long, black broadcloth coat. He leaned against the mahogany bar, cold red eyes glaring from under heavy, shaggy eyebrows.

With a new set of hardware and a dead cigarette pasted to his lips, Buck Kells leaned on the end of the bar and watched the procedure like a hawk. In the fringe of his vision Billy caught a pair of nondescript killers slumped over a poker table on which there were no cards.

Billy regretted that he hadn't somehow shown Laura that he understood this thing she had done. Now it was too late. He was speaking to the man with the cold red eyes.

"You got no opponent now, McQuade," he said crisply. "Rizdale is dead."

Startled exclamations echoed through the hush. But Kells never twitched an eyelash, and the table pair crouched like rattlers ready to strike. McQuade removed the big cigar from his teeth.

Billy watched him closely. "Rizdale was on his way to dicker with you, McQuade," he said. "He didn't want me shot from ambush like my dad. But the killer posted in that vacant building out there thought he was on his way to tell me what he knew. The same killer got Dad when he come runnin' to quell your ruckus. He tried to get me this evening and made his getaway through the upstairs window of the Texas House, McQuade."

McQuade's eyes narrowed. "You're mistaken, Marshal."

Billy shook his head. "When he went through that window," said Billy, "he tore a piece out of his coattail."

McQuade's head jerked, and he glanced involuntarily down at his coattail. Too late, he realized Billy's trick. He lurched sidewise, diving for his gun.

He was twisted in that position when Billy's two 41's rattled their song of death. Blood smashed out on his forehead, as his red eyes rolled and set.

THE room turned into a bedlam of gunfire as Fete and Costner drew with the poker-table killers. Buck Kells took it up from there, firing from the end of the bar. Billy shuddered, and his left hand dropped his gun and clutched the bar edge for support. The gun in his right hand kept roaring. Buck Kells spun and fell with his face in the sawdust on the floor. Then Billy's gun dropped from his fingers. He felt as if a great weight was pulling him down. . .

When the smoke cleared the poker-table pair hung grotesquely over the backs of their chairs. Costner was nursing a shattered arm and Fete blotted blood from a wound in his leg. Billy lay on the floor beside the footrail.

It was there that Laura found him as she burst into the room. The color was drained from her face. Around her mouth she was chalk-white. Through a cloud of dull, burning misery Billy saw her drop beside him, pillowing his head and sobbing like a child.

"Billy," she whispered, "you mustn't die. Black Dog will want your guns always. . ."

Her plea seemed to drive the numbing pain from his brain. "I'm gonna be all right, Laura," he promised. He had come back up the Trail to stay. . .

THE END

TROUBLE TRAIL

By Roe Richmond

"I'm a peace-loving puncher at heart. Never did go hunting trouble. In the old days, trouble just naturally kept on my trail." But the old days' echo kept coming back to dog Slim Rand, and keep him drifting along the trouble trail, until he came to the town where sleek wolves rodded the law, and their only opposition was a discredited, broken sheriff . . .

COMPLETE NOVEL

"YOU'RE sure leading a right quiet life these days, Slim," the bartender said. "Just a plain ordinary cowhand. I can't figure how you stand it."

"I like it, Mac," drawled Slim Rand, elbows on the bar and a grin on his lean bronzed face. "I'm a peace-loving puncher at heart. Never did go hunting trouble. In the old days trouble just naturally kept on my trail."

Mac laughed. "Don't kid me, cowboy."

Slim Rand shook his head sadly. "I can't seem to convince folks of my true nature."

"Do you wonder why?" asked Mac. "A hombre with your reputation. Everybody's heard of Arizona Slim. Hellfire on the loose."

"Arizona Slim's dead," Rand told him gravely.

A stocky red-faced man turned down the bar. There was a sneer on his loose-lipped mouth. His little eyes glittered as he moved toward Slim Rand with a rolling swagger. "Who's supposed to be a bad man? Our young friend here?"

"Ace, don't start no trouble here," warned the barkeeper. "Go sit down somewhere."

"Don't make me mad," said the man called Ace. "I'll shoot up your joint." He turned to Slim. "So you're the two-gun gent Mac's raving about?"

A green flare showed in Slim Rand's gray eyes. He said: "I only pack one gun. You can see that. I'm just a rider with a mild thirst."

"Beat it, Ace," Mac ordered. "You're dumb with rum. Get out before something happens."

"Ace Bash don't run from you, Mac, nor from any tinhorn badman." The man stood there, feet planted wide, thumbs hooked into belt, a leer on his red-blotched face.

"You fool," Mac said. "This is Arizona Slim Rand here."

"That don't mean nothing to me," Ace Bash said. "To me he's just another punk horse-wrangler."

"I guess I better be going," Slim Rand drawled. "The air's getting bad in here. So long, Mac." He turned and slouched toward the door with lazy grace.

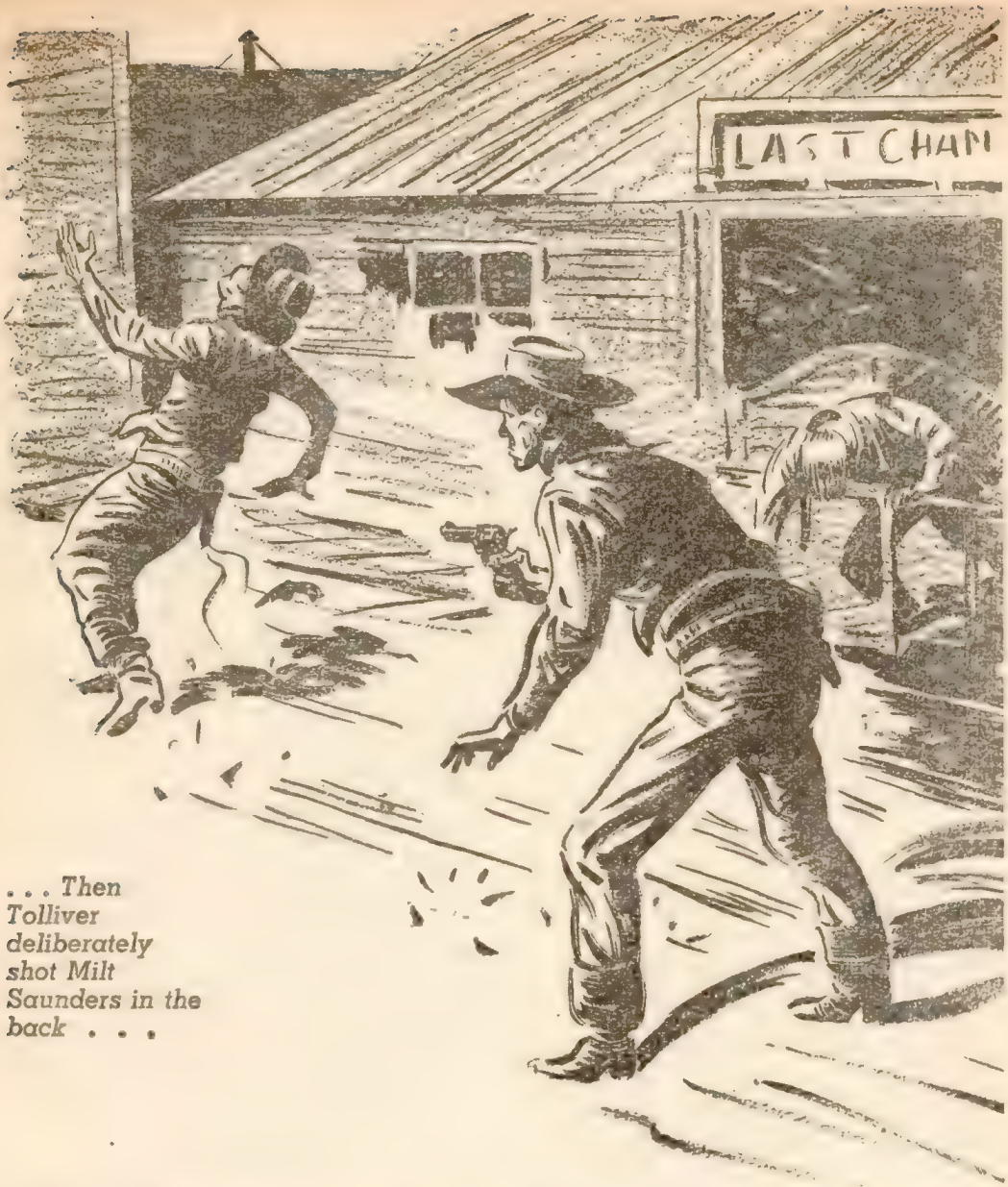
Ace Bash glared after him: "You're damn right you better be going!"

Mac said: "Don't get that boy riled. He'll give you a quick dose of lead-poisoning, Ace."

"Is that so?" demanded Bash. "He was scared sick. I'll show you how tough he is." Bash wheeled from the bar and swaggered after Slim. Mac came out from behind the bar and followed him, wiping his sweaty palms on his apron.

"Hey, you!" called Ace Bash. "Come back here. I ain't going to hurt you."

Slim Rand was halfway across the



. . . Then Tolliver deliberately shot Milt Saunders in the back . . .

street. Dust spiralled up from his boots as he turned. His eyes were squinted against the sun. "I don't care for your company," he said. All along the street men were stopping to turn and watch. Pointed fingers drew the attention of others to the front of the Blue Moon Saloon where Bash was standing.

Bash's mocking laughter rang through the heat. "Why, you yellow pup," Bash said, loud-voiced. "I knew—"

Slim Rand took three long strides toward him. "If you ask for it again you'll get it."

MAC took hold of Bash's arm, but Bash threw him off. Bash braced himself, clawed hands tense at his sides, fingers working. Slim Rand stood straight and easy, then moved to one side to get out of the blinding sun. Ace Bash snarled something and his right hand jerked. For Slim Rand it was just a flip of the wrist, and stabbing flames leaped from his right thigh. His gun half-drawn, Ace Bash shuddered with the impact of lead, took two drunken steps forward from the porch, and pitched head-first across the board sidewalk.

Dust clouded up as Bash landed on

his hands and knees. "I don't want to kill you," Slim Rand said to the floundering bulk. But Ace Bash brought his gun up, wavering in both hands, and fired. The first shot spouted dirt against Slim's leg. The second sang close by his ear. Then Slim Rand cut loose with his forty-five and Ace Bash stiffened and was still, full length on the ground.

Sheriff Ainsworth walked across the street and bent his gray head over Bash. Straightening he turned to Slim Rand and said, "He's dead."

"I know," Slim said dully. "I had to do it."

"Yes, he called for it, Slim," said Ainsworth. "I saw the whole thing. But I'll have to take you."

Slim Rand finished loading his gun and looked up. Slowly he shook his head. "I won't go, Sheriff."

Ainsworth's gaunt lined face was solemn. "Well, you've got the drop on me. I don't plan on following Bash. But you'll have to get out of here, Slim."

"I'm on my way," Slim Rand said. "Thanks, Sheriff. So long, Mac."

"Keep your gun out and back off to your horse," Ainsworth said. "It'll look better."

Slim Rand backed toward the hitching-rail, gun in hand, eyes on the sheriff. Nick was there, a big rangy black horse with a white face. Slim swung into the saddle, whirled Nick down an alley, and was gone. Dust billowed back from Nick's hoofs.

"It's a damn shame," Mac said. "Plain self-defense."

Ainsworth nodded soberly. "It's too bad," he argued. "But for a boy like Slim there's no such thing as self-defense, Mac."

"The law will make a real bad man out of Slim yet," said the bartender.

Out on the open trail Slim Rand was talking gravely to Nick as he rode. His voice was soft and lazy, but his sunburned face was drawn into a hard mask.

"Well, old pardner," Slim was saying. "It looks like you and me are riding the trouble trail again."

FROM Texas, Slim Rand drifted northward, keeping a jump or two ahead of the law.

In Red River he went broke. At the bar where he spent his last dollar he fell into conversation with the man beside him. The man had a plain frank face with serene blue eyes and a square jaw. He was a head shorter than Slim, but built wide and solid. He said his name was Milt Saunders. Slim liked the looks of Saunders, felt instinctively that the man was all right.

"Seems like I've seen you some place," Saunders mused, after they had talked for some time.

"I'm Slim Rand. But right now I'm traveling under the name of Texas Trent."

"I remember now," Saunders said. "I saw you up in Pine Bluff. I was there when you shot it out with the Spooner boys. I'll never forget that. There was three of 'em."

"It was quite a jamboree," Slim admitted. "What are you doing now, Saunders?"

"I'm on the loose," said Saunders. "I was sheriff over in Waco County awhile, but I got pushed out. There was a sudden epidemic of holdups, shootings and cattle rustling. The only trail I picked up led too close to some of them politicians. I was going to smoke 'em out too, but they got rid of me before I got a chance to. . . . Since then I been drifting. I had a good run with the cards, but my luck's gone now. And most of my cash with it."

"There's no strings on me either," Slim said. "And I'm broke flat. Is there a game in this town?"

"Right in the back of this saloon," Saunders told him. "But I'm staying out. I know when my luck turns. Seeing them crooked politicians in Waco gave me some new ideas."

"I got to do something pretty quick myself," Slim said. "The law's after me. A guy forced my hand down in Texas. I can't stop to work an honest job. I been doing some thinking along other lines, too."

"I can't get a job either. Them Waco shysters fixed that. They had me hooked up with the outlaws. What

makes it worse, all that stuff stopped as soon as the new sheriff took over. A big boy named Tolliver. There's some funny things happen in Waco County. Maybe you and I could team up on something, Slim. We're both out of bounds."

"I used to be kind of lucky at poker," Slim said. "If you want to take a chance and stake me I'd like to sit in back there."

"I'll take a chance," said Saunders.

There were five men at the table, and Slim Rand didn't like the looks of any of them. There were three spectators, and the big hook-nosed man stood like a sentry by the door. They all eyed Slim coldly as Saunders introduced him, "Texas Trent." Slim was unshaven and travel-worn. A man named Borden seemed to be running the game. Borden had a fierce hawk-face and strange yellow eyes. When Slim sat down Borden said: "Let's have the guns on the table." Six forty-fives were laid on the board. Saunders said: "I'm just looking on. I went clean last night." Borden laughed unpleasantly: "Your friend will follow suit tonight, Saunders."

SLIM started slowly, warily, and Borden taunted him for being so cautious. Then Slim started winning and nothing could stop him. The stakes grew bigger as Borden tried to break Slim's streak, but Slim kept dragging in the chips. The other men began to drop out. The pile in front of Slim mounted steadily. It grew into a duel between Slim Rand and Borden.

"Shall we set a time limit?" asked Slim.

"As long as I can buy chips we'll play," Borden snarled.

"All right," said Slim. "I got nothing else to do." And he went on winning.

Saunders was watching Borden's dark face. Suddenly Saunders spoke: "I thought you said guns on the table, Borden." All eyes switched to Saunders, fell to the gun in his hand. And Saunders said: "Drop that gun, Borden!" Borden's face was swollen and the veins in his temple looked ready to burst. Slim Rand stood up and stepped aside, his own gun in hand.

"Cash the chips," Slim said, green lights showing in his gray gaze.

Under the table Borden's gun thudded to the floor. Borden's yellow eyes flashed a signal to the hook-nosed man at the door, and the man went out. With the two guns trained on him Borden started counting chips.

"Nice little game here," drawled Slim Rand.

"Make it fast, Borden," Saunders said.

Borden threw a sheaf of bills and a heap of silver across the wood. "I'm fifty dollars short," he said.

"Forget it," Slim told him. "Let's get out of here, Milt."

They backed toward the door, the other men watching them tensely. Saunders twisted the knob with his left hand. The door was locked. Behind Borden was the only window in the room. Slim waved the other men into a far corner. Suddenly Borden came up with the big table and smashed it at the two men by the door.

Caught by surprise, Saunders and Slim lurched backwards, and Borden's driving weight pinned them behind the table long enough for the other men to get into it. Then it was a wild rough-and-tumble under the yellow lamp, with no chance for gunplay. Slim was down under two heavy bodies, with a third man wrenching at his gun-hand. Saunders and Borden whirled about in a mad tangle and fell over a splintering chair. They were quickly buried under a writhing mass of bodies, with hands seeking Saunders' face and throat.

It was fist and elbow, boot and knee, butt and barrel, in a furious welter of threshing men.

Straining mightily, Slim Rand fought and kicked his way free, his boot-heels sending one man senseless against the opposite wall, his gun barrel cracking down on another's skull. The third man came back at him, but Slim's left fist sent him tumbling into a corner. Then Slim was on top of the other pile of squirming bodies, using his gun butt like a terrible hammer. Bodies went limp as the butt crashed

down. One man rolled free and came at Slim's back with a knife shining, but Slim lashed out with his boots and the man went down.

SAUNDERS and Borden were still wrestling on the floor. Saunders was on top now and his swinging gun barrel creased the gambler's skull. Slim Rand pulled Saunders to his feet and slammed a chair through the window. Guns were blazing behind them as they leaped out and ran down the alley.

Men were clustered about the hitching rack in front of the saloon, but they fell away before the two running men with the drawn guns. Saunders and Slim swung into their saddles and wheeled the horses. Light shone on their bloody faces, wild-eyed and reckless, and on their torn clothes. Hoarse shouts and the racket of guns burst out as they dashed away. Lead whined and sang overhead. Dust smoked up in the lamplight behind the racing horses.

Well out on the road away from town the two men slowed their pace, and turning toward one another broke into sudden boyish laughter.

"Nice playmates you got in Red River, Milt," Slim said.

"Yeah," said Saunders. "It's a hell of a note when you win your money and then have to fight for it too."

IN CEDAR GULCH Slim won again, but one of the heavy losers reported them to the sheriff as suspicious characters, and Slim and Saunders had to make another flying getaway.

At Sadawga the winning streak continued until one of the players threw a gun on Slim Rand. Slim shot him through the gun-arm, Saunders covered the others, and they backed out of that game with their guns ready.

"I should've told you, Milt," said Slim, "that everywhere I go there's trouble. I can't keep clear of it. I should've warned you before."

"I don't mind a little excitement once in a while," Saunders said. "It's good for a man."

But Slim pushed his luck too far. In Burnsdale they both sat in on a big game, and they lost nearly all they had. They were sure the game was crooked but they did not protest. The sheriff stood by watching, his eyes scarcely leaving Slim Rand's face. Afterwards they learned that the sheriff really ran that game.

"Well," said Saunders. "We can try something else. The Pownal Rodeo is coming on and the prize money is big. It's taking a chance for you to ride in it, Slim. But with those whiskers I doubt if anyone'd recognize you. . . . Pownal's on the edge of Waco County, and I'd kind of like to shop around there a little. There's a bank in Silver City, a rich bank, and it's built like a cheesebox. What do you say?"

"Sounds good to me," Slim said. "We'll earn some money the hard way for a change."

Pownal was crowded for the rodeo. Ranchers and townsfolk brought their entire families. The streets swarmed with drunken cowpunchers and lumberjacks. There were a dozen fist fights to the half hour, and there were several shooting scrapes. All the gamblers and dance-hall girls within a hundred-mile radius were in town. The saloons were like crowded dens of animals. Dust clouds rose thick from the trampling of thousands of feet. Wild cowboy yells cut through the jangle of music and laughter. Revolvers were fired into the air, windows were shattered, lights were shot out.

Slim Rand rode into town alone, his face grimy and unshaven, his clothes ragged and dusty. Another tramp rider drifting in on Rodeo Day. He left Nick in the backyard of the Pownal House, the place agreed upon with Milt Saunders. But there were no rooms to be had. With shoulder and elbow Slim worked his way into a barroom to get a drink. He drank slowly, listening to the talk around him. It was mostly about the rodeo and the favorites who were to ride.

"Looks like Paul Tolliver's boys got it pretty well sewed up," one man said. "There's Billy Birch and Kyle Jason for the bronk riding. Ham Struthers is the best bull-dogger in these parts. Tolliver himself'll take

the shooting prizes. Nobody can rope like Lem Keech."

"There's always some stray riders blowing in," said another. "Tolliver's crew won't have no cinch."

"Aw, Tolliver's got it in the bag," muttered a third man. "Just like he's got all Waco County in the bag. With them hand-picked deputies of his anybody could be sheriff."

"Well, Paul sure cleaned up the county, you got to admit that. It was pretty bad round here when Milt Saunders was sheriff. A man's life and property wasn't worth nothing in them days. Tolliver's put a stop to all that."

"Sure, Saunders was working with the outlaws all the time. Everybody knows that. But things are starting to happen again around Waco. The stage was held up the other night, and old man Barclay lost some cattle."

"Old Barclay can afford to lose 'em! He owns half the county now. With Tolliver's help he'll get to own it all. And then Tolliver will marry that pretty filly of Barclay's. Tolliver figures to be a big man in this part of the country."

"Tolliver's a pretty big man right now."

A DEEP voice broke in: "You said something. And anybody who don't think so will eat lead." The newcomer laughed and pushed his way to the bar. He was big, taller than Slim Rand's six feet, and broad. He had a bold handsome face, red and healthy-looking with deep dark eyes. He was elaborately dressed and wore a sheriff's badge. He shoved Slim Rand aside and then brushed his sleeve, turning a wide back. Slim knew it was Tolliver even before the other men greeted him. And Slim knew that wherever he met Tolliver, under whatever conditions, he would hate the man.

So strong was the impulse in Slim to slap that superior face, he gripped the bar to hold himself back. Then he downed his drink and went out. It was time to register for the rodeo events anyway.

In the press of men at the rodeo grounds Slim bumped into Milt Saunders. Milt said: "Borden's in town, watch out."

"So's Tolliver," said Slim, still with that hard unreasoning hate inside him.

"I never met Tolliver."

"I did," Slim said. "And he's the only man I ever wanted to kill at first sight. His men look for a clean sweep here, Milt."

Saunders smiled gravely. "I know a couple tricks they won't take."

"And I've got a couple more," said Slim. "See you later."

Ten thousand people were in the stadium when the Pownal Rodeo opened. In the bull-dogging contest Ham Struthers had the best time until Milt Saunders took his turn. The steer bolted from the chute, and Milt's trained horse was on top of him. Leaning far out, Saunders grasped the horns, swung off, and threw the animal so quickly the crowd sat stunned. It beat Struthers' time by six seconds.

"Lucky tramp," Ham Struthers growled, broad ugly face set. "You must've got a weak steer."

Saunders' face was solemn. "They're all weak when I get hold of 'em."

"Maybe you think you could throw me?" Struthers sneered.

"Maybe I do," agreed Saunders calmly.

Ham Struthers swung a huge fist. Saunders ducked, stepped forward, and his knuckles mashed Struthers' lips. Then the onlookers split them and pulled them away, big Struthers shouting threats over the heads of the crowd. Saunders rubbed his knuckles and grinned at Slim Rand: "I told you we'd have some fun in Waco County."

IN THE roping event Milt Saunders took first money, and Slim Rand was a close second. Struthers and the other Tolliver men gathered around the beaten and unbelieving Lem Keech, all eying Saunders and Slim Rand. Slim said: "They don't like us very much, Milt." All through the crowd people were asking one another: "Who are them tramp riders anyway? They must be ringers from somewheres. They must've come down from Cheyenne."

Then Saunders took the steer riding

contest from Ham Struthers, and the crowd began to pay tribute to the stocky sober-faced man with the reddish whiskers and the mild blue eyes. A half dozen men held Struthers away from his rival. Sheriff Paul Tolliver was in their midst now, his tongue lashing Struthers and Lem Keech.

The shooting match was next and Tolliver strode forth, bowing to the thunder of applause. At the targets on foot Tolliver won with the rifle; Slim Rand beat him with the six-gun. Shooting from the saddle on the dead run Slim Rand's perfect score with both rifle and revolver left Tolliver far behind, and the prize was Slim's.

Tolliver was outwardly quiet but his black eyes blazed, and when Ham Struthers made some joking remark Tolliver knocked him down. The crowd was in a turmoil. Two unknown tramp riders were sweeping every event.

Tolliver said: "There's something queer about them two. They're too good to be just stray cowhands. You boys keep an eye on them after this is over. I want to have a talk with 'em. I wouldn't be surprised if they was wanted somewhere."

The final and main event was the bucking contest. Milt Saunders made a good bid, but both Billy Birch and Kyle Jason bested him with beautiful performances. Men said: "Here's one prize money them two strangers won't take." But a stir went through the thousands massed around the barrier as the announcer bellowed through his megaphone: "Texas Trent—on Rockaway Regis!"

Slim had drawn a good horse. Rockaway Regis was red dynamite, famous throughout the region. He needed a good horse if he was to beat Birch and Jason. The red horse was tough and vicious, untamable, and hard to stay with. But if Slim could stick it would make a fine show.

He climbed the rails and waited. Regis fought the saddle savagely. When it was ready Slim dropped down, found the stirrups, and lifted his hand. The gate went up and the red horse rocketed out of the chute. At the first buck Slim knew he was on as tough a bronk as he had ever ridden. Regis knew all the tricks and still had the fire and fury of a wild horse that had never felt a saddle.

The red horse took a few straight bucks, hump-backed and stiff-legged. Limber as rubber, Slim Rand took the jolts. Then Regis weaved and pitched in madness. Dust boiled under the thundering hoofs. Regis reared straight up, swung in wild circles, and then flung his head low and heels high. The steel-thighed rider was still locked there, following the violent motions by instinct. The terrific jolts shot lightning from the base of Slim's spine to his brain. He was sick and dazed from the beating. The time should be up, he thought in despair.

ROCKAWAY REGIS reared once more, pivoted, seemed to explode under Slim. Then the red horse flogged left and right, twisted and pitched, until Slim's body was one column of agony and no breath was left in his lungs. The sound of the gun was a long way off, signalling the end of the ride. Regis stopped fighting and ran straight-away, the pick-up men following. A long hoarse roar surged down from the stands, but Slim Rand could not hear it for the throbbing in his ears.

The judges put their heads together. The crowd waited on edge. Thumbs in belts, Tolliver's men stared at the two strangers. Slim Rand was sitting with his back against the corral, and Milt Saunders was rolling him a cigarette. "That," said Saunders, "was something to see."

Then the announcer raised his megaphone and his voice blared forth: "The winner—Texas Trent, riding Rockaway Regis! Second place: Kyle Jason, on War Paint. . . ."

At the head of the others Slim Rand and Milt Saunders walked to the central box to receive their prize money from the Queen of the Rodeo. On their backs they felt the hostile eyes of Tolliver, Struthers, Keech, Jason and the rest. Saunders said: "This is the part I don't like." Slim nodded: "And I got a feeling we better get out of town quick." Grimly Saunders said: "Yeah, if we can."

The Queen had black hair that gleamed in the sun. Her bronzed face was finely carved. Slim Rand took in the broad pure brow, the direct brown eyes, the sharp nose, generous mouth—and the stubborn strength of the chin. The Queen smiled upon them and spoke a few words of praise. Neither one heard the words or made an intelligible answer.

They moved aside and took stock of their new fortune. Between them they had a thousand dollars.

"If we was smart," Slim Rand said. "We'd get us a little place somewhere and settle down."

Saunders said: "We ain't smart, and we ain't the settling-down kind."

"I don't know," mused Slim. "A man's got to settle down sometime."

"Looking at that girl, the Queen, gives you ideas, Slim."

"Maybe. She's pretty nice to look at. Do you know who she is, Milt?"

"Sure, I know," Saunders said. "She's Old Man Barclay's daughter. Sandra Barclay. And they say Tolliver is going to marry her."

SLIM and Saunders bought grub, supplies and new outfits of clothing, and loaded the purchases into their saddlebags. They washed off some of the rodeo sweat and dirt, but did not change their clothes or get shaved. They left the Pownal House by a side door. Two men were talking at the corner of the frame structure. Slim Rand pulled Saunders back into the shadows. Saunders said: "Borden," as he glimpsed the gambler's hawk-face in profile. Slim nodded and said: "The other one's Tolliver. Funny they'd have so much in common." Saunders laughed silently: "Maybe it's us, Slim."

They circled the hotel and entered the main street from the other side. Pownal was caught in the mad spirit of carnival. They decided to have one drink to celebrate their winnings, and went into the bedlam of the Great Western Saloon. It was a struggle to reach the long bar. There they were immediately recognized and hailed. It seemed that every man there wanted to buy them drinks. The people of Waco County were secretly glad to see Paul Tolliver and his deputies take a beating. It was a great deal more difficult to leave the bar than it had been to get to it.

Slim and Saunders were still trying to break away when three men came pushing their way roughly through the crowd: Ham Struthers, Kyle Jason and Lem Keech. Struthers said: "Somebody wants to see you two outside."

"We're busy," said Slim Rand.

"It's orders from Sheriff Tolliver, stranger."

"We're still busy," Slim drawled.

Kyle Jason was lean, wiry, nervous. "Come on," he said impatiently, "or we'll take you along."

"Have you got a warrant for us?" inquired Saunders.

Ham Struthers roared: "I don't need a warrant to take you!"

"Well," said Saunders. "Here I am."

Struthers moved forward but Lem Keech stopped him. "It's easy enough to get a warrant. We don't want trouble here, Ham." The three started for the doorway. Kyle Jason kept looking back and gently tapping the butt of his gun.

"You boys better get out of here," a man told them.

"We're leaving right away," Slim Rand said. "Is there a back door to this place?"

"Come on, I'll show you," the man said, leading the way to the rear of the saloon. "Tolliver don't like the licking you boys handed him. He's used to having things his own way."

"He better get over that," said Slim. "Thanks, pardner."

"Good luck," the man said. He was gray-haired with a seamed leathery voice. "My name's Tobin. If I can ever help you I'll be glad to. I got an old account against Tolliver and his men."

They were out in the dark clutter of a backyard. As they crossed behind an alley to reach the board fence, dark running figures showed against the lighted mouth of the alleyway and a shot rang out. Slim and Saunders, guns in hand, flattened themselves behind garbage barrels at the foot of the fence. The advantage was

all theirs. The light was behind their assailants.

"Stop where you are," warned Slim, firing high.

The men in the alley scattered and crouched low against the buildings on either side. But they kept shooting. Red flames streaked the darkness and the reports crashed rapidly. Bullets splintered the wooden fence and whanged off the metal barrels. "Give it to 'em," said Slim quietly, and shot from the ground. A figure lurched upright in the alley, twisted wildly and fell with arms thrown wide. Saunders was firing calmly and steadily. A lull came and Struthers' bull-throated voice sounded: "They got Billy Birch, the ———!"

"We'll get you all if you don't back out of there," Slim said. "You're easy targets, you fools."

THE back door of the saloon opened again and the lights silvered a gray head. "What's all the shooting about?" Tobin asked. "I want to be dealt in." He stepped out into the yard, gun in hand.

"Look out, Tobin!" yelled Slim Rand, as the man walked toward the fence. But it was too late. Tobin took two steps across the open alley and a gun boomed. Tobin turned slowly and fell to his hands and knees, crawling back to the shelter of the building. Guns started whamming wildly and the air was full of screaming lead. Tobin was alive. . . . Slim saw the flashes of his gun as he fired round the corner. In the alley a man gasped and coughed, rolled away from the wall.

"You boys beat it," Tobin called, panting. "I'll hold 'em. I'm done—anyways."

"We're staying," Slim told him.

"Don't be fools," Tobin said. "I'm done for. I know it. But I can hold 'em. . . You fan the hell out of here!"

"We better go while we can," Saunders muttered. "No sense in all of us getting it."

"Right," Slim said. Then, "Tobin! Their whole outfit will pay for this. You're a man."

"Get the hell out of here," Tobin said wearily.

With catlike quickness Slim and Saunders jumped high and swung over the tall board fence, slugs whining and humming all around them. They ran down another alley opening on a side street, crossed the street and stumbled through dark backyards toward the Pownal House. Climbing another barrier they dropped into the shadows behind the hotel. Their horses were saddled and ready. They swung up, panting hard, reloaded their guns, and listened briefly to the mad excitement of the main street.

"Out this way," Slim said, "and cut down the left-hand street."

They went out on the run. As they swerved to the left, shots and curses were hurled after them. Hanging low over their horses' necks they let them go full speed. Bullets droned by but there was no organized pursuit yet. They had a fair start, good enough. As they rode they were both thinking of gray-haired Tobin lying out back of the Great Western Saloon.

"They've started something that we're going to finish," Saunders said grimly.

"And finishing it calls for a lot of Tolliver blood," said Slim Rand.

THE hideout was high in the hills north of Silver City, and it was made-to-order. Deep in the pine forest they had found this narrow cleft in the earth, walled with rock and hidden by the trees. The bottom was soft with moss and pine needles. A spring, bubbling from the ledge, emptied into a stone basin. The lower end was deep enough for the horses to stand. Elsewhere a man could peer over the rim by standing upright.

Saunders, red-bearded and sullen, was fashioning a stone fireplace when Slim left him to ride down into Silver City. Slim Rand was clean-shaven and washed, immaculate in new blue jeans, soft gray shirt, and blue scarf. There was no likeness between him and the ragged bearded Texas Trent of the Pownal Rodeo, and he had little fear of being recognized by Tolliver's men. But the trouble in Pownal had made it nec-

essary for Saunders to keep out of sight altogether. If he shaved he'd be recognized as the ex-sheriff with the shady reputation. And with the beard he was the rodeo star who shot his way out of Pownal and was wanted for the killing of Billy Birch and Charley Gavin, two of Tolliver's deputies. His enforced idleness Saunders did not like at all.

"I'll have a look at that bank you spoke of, Milt," Slim told him before he left.

Saunders growled: "We might as well crack it. They've made outlaws of us."

Silver City was a huddle of frame houses in the valley. A white-painted church at the head of Main Street was the only thing that distinguished the town. In the grocery store across from the bank Slim bought tobacco and supplies. Business was slow, so Slim sat on the porch chewing dried peaches and talking with the storekeeper. From time to time Slim's eyes strayed to the rickety wooden bank building across the way.

"You wouldn't think it," said the storekeeper, "but that there's a mighty rich bank. The richest in Waco County."

Slim said: "It don't look as if it would hold hay, let alone money."

"Listen, stranger. With the sheriff we got they don't even need to lock that bank."

"So this is a pretty law-abiding town?" Slim said.

"The whole county's been that way, since they got rid of that crooked Saunders. He was sheriff before Tolliver. Tolliver's done a good job here. But lately there's been a little trouble. Hold-ups, shootings and all. Some say Saunders is back. Others think that Arizona Slim is working 'round these parts."

Slim smiled at the cigarette he was making. "What does the sheriff think?"

"Tolliver says he knows it's either Saunders or Rand. There's Tolliver now, way down at the end of the street. That big strapping man out in front. He's a tough one, too, Tolliver is. He can fight with guns and he can fight with his hands."

"What's that pack at his heels? Bodyguard?"

"Stranger, Paul Tolliver don't need no bodyguard, you can rest easy about that. He'll take care of himself. Them are his deputies. He lost two of 'em in Pownal last week. Billy Birch, the bronk rider, and a boy named Charley Gavin. But Tolliver will get the killers. He got one of 'em, a man named Tobin."

"What are the deputies like?"

"Good men," said the storekeeper. "That big-shouldered one is Ham Struthers and he's stronger than a bull. Kyle Jason, the slim quick one in the checkered shirt, he's all hell with a six-shooter. Lem Keech is smart and sly as a fox, he's got a fox-face. And when he gets started he's poison-mean. The limpy one, the one that drags his foot along, that's Olin Varick, and he's a gunman like Kyle Jason. The other two are new men to take the place of Birch and Gavin, and I ain't acquainted with them."

"Quite a little posse," murmured Slim.

There came the quick drum of hoofbeats and Slim Rand turned to see a white horse coming. The rider was a girl in a black riding habit. Dark hair blew back from her clear face, and Slim recognized the Rodeo Queen. He asked carelessly: "Who's the girl?"

"Why, that's Sandra Barclay. Old Man Barclay's girl. He owns that bank there, and most everything else 'round here."

The girl dismounted at the rack and walked toward the store with easy grace. Slim felt the hard pounding of his heart. She ignored Slim, greeted the storekeeper pleasantly, and they went inside. She came out, proud and high-headed, but at the hitching-rack she dropped one of her packages, tried awkwardly to retrieve it. Slim left the porch swiftly and picked it up for her. She thanked him. His face felt warm under her straight brown gaze. When Slim Rand turned there stood Tolliver and his men, their eyes hard and hostile on him. He thought he'd been recognized and it was all over. . .

THEN Tolliver shouldered past him to speak to Sandra Barclay, and Slim felt relief. He started for the porch but the huge Ham Struthers barred his way. "Just a minute, stranger." Beside Struthers was Kyle Jason with a grimace of a smile and his hand nervous over his gun butt.

"What do you want?" Slim asked.

Tolliver was back before Struthers could reply. Tolliver said: "What's your business here, stranger?"

Slim could not control his flaring hatred for this man. He said slowly: "My business—is just that."

Tolliver's face tightened. "Answer decent," he said. "I'm checking on strangers. There are outlaws in Waco and I can't take chances. Last week I had two men shot down in cold blood in a dark alley."

"Sorry," Slim said, regaining control. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm just riding through."

Tolliver's black eyes bored into him. "All right then. Better keep riding. Come on, boys." He led them across to the bank. Kyle Jason flicked glances back over his shoulder. Olin Varick's left leg dragged badly as he walked.

"Not very friendly," Slim remarked to the storekeeper.

"He's worked up over those two men he lost. You can't blame him. Then they say there's a big shipment of gold coming in by stage pretty soon. With outlaws on the loose I reckon they're busy laying plans to guard it through."

"I reckon they better be," Slim Rand said to himself as he turned with his supplies in hand.

Slim Rand and Milt Saunders came down from the hills, riding softly in the moonlight night. The slopes and the plains below were flooded with silver. The mountains in the south bulked dark against the night-blue sky. A wolf howled in the distance. The smell of sage and sunburnt earth replaced the odor of the pines as they dropped lower. They could see the black ribbon of road along which the stage would come.

"It's too damn light," Saunders complained.

"We'll use our scarves," Slim said. "There'll be extra guards."

Slim said: "If there are too many we'll pass it up."

They dismounted and led the horses as they neared the road. At the point they had chosen the trail was enclosed by steep brush-grown walls. Following the shadows they moved toward the rock-strewn bluff above the road. Below them a horse whinnied, and they clasped the noses of their own mounts.

"Somebody's a little previous," Slim said. "Somebody likes our choice, Milt."

"What we going to do now?"

"We'll have a look," said Slim Rand. "We might learn things. We might find out who's pulling all the stuff we're getting credit for."

They crept closer to the brink. The narrow gulch below breathed with silent and waiting men. Slim estimated there must be a dozen of them anyway. He was glad he and Milt were packing two guns apiece tonight. They pulled their scarves up across their noses and waited.

Now the stagecoach could be heard to the west, the pound of hoofs, a creak of wood and leather, the rattling spin of wheels. A stirring sounded from the dark pass as the men in ambush got ready. "No outriders with that coach," Slim said, listening intently. "That's funny. . ."

The stage clattered into the pass and flares went up on both sides as challenges sounded. The coach lurched to a groaning halt, the horses plunging and rearing in the red glare. Masked riders swarmed about the stage with rifles and six-guns leveled. Slim and Saunders mounted and urged their horses to the rim of the ledge.

"Let's have some fun," Slim Rand said. "Let's break this up, Milt. If they scatter pick a single rider and trail him. I'll do the same. Don't follow any bunches."

They fired across the gully and yelled like Indians. Slim shouted: "Come on, boys, let 'em have it!" Saunders raised his voice. The total impression was that of a large attacking force.

The pass became a chaos of pitching horses and cursing men. Tongues of fire leaped back toward the ledge. The outlaws milled about the narrow cut in utter confusion, and already some of them were in headlong flight. It was a wild scene in the flaring torchlight. As Slim and Saunders went on shooting and whooping complete panic swept the raiders. The thunder of hoofs filled the night as the outlaws scrambled away from the light and fled in all directions. Rifles roared after them from the stagecoach.

SLIM RAND singled out one rider who lagged behind to throw shots at the ledge and the coach. Saunders was already off in another direction. Slim loaded his gun, slid Nick down the steep embankment, and took up the chase.

Across the open prairie Slim gained steadily with Nick running strong and smooth. Slim held his fire. He wanted a man who could talk, not a corpse. An idea had been growing in his mind, and here was a chance to learn whether it was true or false.

The country became rough and broken. They climbed through shale, crossed a flat-topped mesa, crashed through brush, and then pounded along a ridge. The outlaw was lining straight toward the mountains. He dropped into the head of a long gulch, emerged on a wooded upgrade, and climbed through the forest. Slim lost sight of him, but stayed always within sound. Slim expected an ambush at any minute, but the man ahead kept traveling.

The woods thinned out into scrubby growth, and soon they rode upward among jagged cliffs. The moon was bright on the boulder-strewn terrain. Great pinnacles of rock rose against the stars. The outlaw turned in his saddle and fired back, the lead singing through the silvered air. Slim threw a few shots after him. The beating hoofs struck fire from the rock-surface. Slim took another crack at the man and the horse went down, throwing the outlaw clear.

The man stumbled upright and ran for cover. His left leg dragged behind him, and recognition was sharp in Slim's mind. Either the man had hurt his leg in the fall or he was Olin Varick, Tolliver's limping deputy and gunman. As the cripple reached the shelter of a boulder Slim's bullets chipped rock close above his head.

Slim Rand was out of the saddle and pressed close to a boulder before the outlaw's bullets streaked back at him. The landscape was a rough pattern of white and black. Grotesque shadows fell everywhere across the glow of the moon. Peering ahead Slim saw that they were near the top of a cliff, and the next flash of the outlaw's gun came from farther away. The man was working back towards the cliff. Slim Rand slipped 'round the side, ducking low as he ran twenty forward and found cover again. Rock splinters stung his face as he dived to safety. The fellow could shoot, whoever he was.

The next shot flew so wild that Slim laughed—until he heard the scream from Nick. Turning he saw that Nick was down, thrashing terribly, then going still and stiff. That had been deliberate. Now they were both on foot in the wilderness of rock. White flame burned away the horror of loss and pain that was in him, and Slim Rand was up and racing forward, dodging low from boulder to boulder, before he realized it.

Bullets sprayed dirt and stonedust over him, but Slim Rand went on. The man fell back before him. On the run Slim got an instant's opening and dropped the outlaw with a fast shot. Now they were almost on the brink of the cliff, and the man rolled over, fired crazily, and went on reeling, dragging himself toward the dark chasm. Slim Rand threw another slug into him, and he was down floundering and flopping at the edge of the cliff.

Slim Rand fired and ran ahead. The hammer clicked on a spent shell. Both guns were empty, but he had his man. . . Then, flopping like a fish on a bank, the outlaw flung himself over the side and was gone. Slim

stood staring into the depths of darkness, shocked numb. A sliding crash and a long rumble came up from below. Then there was only the lessening pelt of trailing stones and dirt.

He could have sworn the man was Olin Varick, but now there was no way of knowing for sure.

WEARY and dull, drained of emotion, Slim Rand walked slowly back toward his dead horse, even neglecting to reload the guns. He was kneeling at Nick's head when a sharp voice reached him. In one motion Slim Rand was up and around, gun butts in hands. He realized that the guns were empty and his hands dropped. . . There coming out from the shadow of a tall column of rock was Lem Keech, his rat-face grinning and a rifle in his hands. Behind him were three riders covering Slim with their six-shooters.

"I arrest you," said Lem Keech, "for attempt to hold up the stage. And for the murder of an officer in pursuit of his duty!"

"Then it was Olin Varick," Slim stated.

"I didn't say it was," Keech sneered. "It don't matter who it was—to you. You'll soon be going the same way. I ought to shoot you down right here. But I know Tolliver wants you, and he don't want you to die too easy. We'll let you rot in jail for a spell. Maybe we can have a little fun with you while you're there."

"Before this thing is over," said Slim Rand, "you'll wish you'd shot me here."

When the raiders fled the stagecoach Milt Saunders had picked out his man, but as he wheeled his horse along the ledge stone and earth crumbled beneath them. Horse and man dropped and slid scrambling down into the pass. Saunders kept his seat and used the spurs to get out of there fast.

A man was just stepping from the coach, carrying a heavy bag, and the red torchlight glimmered upon him. Saunders caught his breath as he recognized the hawk-face and yellow eyes of Borden, the gambler, and he knew instinctively that Borden had been riding in the stage, working with the outlaws from the inside.

Borden lifted his gun as Saunders bore down upon him, and the blaze scorched Saunders' cheek as his horse's shoulder struck Borden and knocked him back against the coach. The horse reared wild with fright, and when Saunders finally got him turned Borden was already climbing onto a riderless horse. Saunders fired but Borden was gone, back in the direction the stage had come from. Forgetful of everything else Saunders drove his horse westward after the gambler.

Borden made no effort to leave the road, and it was soon evident that Saunders could not overtake him. Blind chance had given the gambler a superior horse. Cursing Saunders watched the man pull steadily away from him until he was lost from sight, and soon even the sound of hoofbeats was gone. Saunders' first impulse was to keep on after Borden and eventually run him down when he stopped to rest or eat. But that was a long shot, he knew, for Borden might pull off the road and double back, or he might cut straight across country to north or south.

Then a new idea came to Saunders and a sober smile touched his square face. It was a strong hunch, and he had faith in his hunches. He remembered how Borden and Tolliver had had their heads together that night in Pownal. . . Saunders scratched the reddish beard that had been irritating him all these days, and turned his horse back into the northern hills toward the hideout.

Two hours later Milt Saunders was riding a back way into Silver City. He was shaved slick and clean, dressed in a brand new outfit. With satisfaction he stroked the strong line of his jaws. He was himself again, Milt Saunders, the ex-sheriff. He might not be popular in Waco County, but at least he was not wanted for murder as the red-bearded rodeo winner was. . .

As he picked his way round-about the dark side streets the white-painted church loomed up in the night.

Old Man Barclay had given the town that church, and the people were proud of it. To avoid hitting the main street at once Saunders angled to the rear of the prim white structure. It was kind of a pretty building, at that. People said Old Man Barclay had it copied from churches they had back East. But it looked out of place, standing proudly over the unpainted shacks of Silver City. Somehow the church had always reminded Saunders of Sandra Barclay . . . He wondered if Slim Rand had really fallen for the girl. He hoped not, because it would be like reaching for the moon.

THERE came the startling sound of hoofs pawing the ground, and gun in hand Saunders edged 'round the back corner of the church. A riderless horse stood restlessly there in the shadows. From inside the church flickered a faint yellow light, and Saunders sat tense watching the shadows come and go. Getting carefully down Saunders slid along the clapboards to the window and peered over the sill. Borden and another man were bending over something in the corner of the narrow back room. Borden turned to lift another bag from the floor.

So! thought Milt Saunders. Old Man Barclay's church is a hiding-place for stolen gold...In the wavering candlelight Borden's yellow eyes flared like a wild beast's, and his right hand swung as he dropped the bag. Glass shattered in Saunders' face as he ducked back, and bright fragments showered over him. Saunders twisted his body and fired at a sharp angle. The other man was turning when the slug hit him, and his face had a foolish look of surprise as he doubled forward and dropped.

Borden snuffed the candle and cut loose with his gun from the dark. Splinters and broken glass flew. Saunders left the wrecked window and slipped along the wall to the back door. Now the game was at a standstill, one man inside, the other outside, and neither daring to move.

Saunders was afraid Borden would leave by some other exit, if he gave him too much time. . . Saunders flung the door open and sprang aside. Borden's gun slammed again. Saunders picked up a heavy stone, stepped away from the building, and hurled it in through the broken window. The noise was still on the air as Saunders went through the door and crouched against the further wall. He could hear Borden's breathing. Moonlight was thin and vague among the heavy shadows. A board creaked as Borden moved, and then he blurred a patch of pale light.

The flame of Milt Saunders' gun showed Borden falling, a look of fear and amazement on his hawk-face. Saunders leaped aside, tripping over the other man's body. Borden fired from the floor and Saunders felt the breath of the bullets. Then, aiming at the flashes, Milt Saunders cut loose with both guns. This time there was no reply, no movement. Saunders was alone in the riddled room with two dead men and a hoard of gold.

He had to get out of there, and fast. Fumbling in the dark, he grabbed up two heavy bags and went outside. Now that it was all over he felt weak and shaky. That racket would have the whole town up. Already he could hear doors banging, men's voices calling, and the rushing trample of booted feet.

BUY WAR BONDS

Swinging into the saddle, Saunders wheeled his horse and broke away into the night and the open country.

And so Silver City was already wide awake and swarming with grim-faced men when Lem Keech and his riders brought Slim Rand into town.

The jail was a square brick building of two stories. The ground floor was occupied by the spacious office of Paul Tolliver and quarters for his men. The cells were on the second floor, and Slim Rand was in a front one overlooking the main street.

A mob had gathered about the jail and the angry murmur came up to Slim. From his small barred window Slim could see the men crowding about, shaking their fists at the building, uttering hoarse threats. Slim Rand felt helpless as never before, alone, unarmed, shut off from everything.

Tolliver and a line of men with rifles and shotguns guarded the front of the jail, but Slim knew they'd offer no opposition if the mob got worked up enough to attack. Tolliver wanted Slim Rand dead and he didn't care how it came about. Tolliver towered above the others, a handsome figure in his white sombrero, black silk shirt with white trimmings, and ornate riding boots.

ACROSS the street big Ham Struthers and ferret-faced Lem Keech were watching the scene and talking. In front of the Lucky Dollar Saloon was Kyle Jason, lean and tough and nervy, impatient for trouble to start. . . The crowd was in an ugly mood and there was lynching talk on the heat-laden air. Dust rolled up in stifling clouds from the restless boots. Slim Rand knew the feeling of a trapped animal waiting for the death-blow.

"All I ask is two guns and a chance to go out shooting," Slim Rand said to himself. For some reason his thoughts turned to Sandra Barclay. She was honest and decent, she might listen to him. . . But there was no way of reaching the girl.

The clamor of the crowd grew loud and menacing, the throng surged forward, shots were fired at the jail building. The stage had been held up, the church that was the pride of Silver City had been desecrated, Borden and a deputy named Hyde lay dead in town, and Olin Varick was lost in the mountains. The people demanded the forfeit of Slim Rand's life.

Across from the jail in the City Hotel Milt Saunders was talking to Sandra Barclay. His mind, like Slim's, had turned to her as a last resort. He had begged her to meet him in his room, and now he was talking desperately, earnestly, behind a locked door to convince her of the true situation.

"You've got to listen, Miss," Saunders pleaded. "That boy over there is innocent. You can't sit by and see him hung for something he didn't do. He and I know who held up the stage and we know where the gold is. We know the gang that's been pulling all these deals in Waco County, and we'll round them up if you give us a chance."

"But what can I do?" said Sandra Barclay. "I want to see justice done, and so does my father. But we trust Paul Tolliver to handle that."

"Listen to that mob, miss," Saunders pleaded. "They won't hold back much longer. They'll break in and take that innocent boy out and lynch him. As fine a man as ever breathed. Do you want to see that happen in Silver City?"

"No, of course not. But I don't see how I can prevent it or help you in any way."

"You could let him out of there, Miss Barclay. You could save his life. While they're all herded out front you could slip in and turn him loose the back way. Give him his guns and a horse, that's all, and a fighting chance. Within the week we'll break this outlaw gang and clean up Waco County. That's what you could do, miss. Nobody'd suspicion you over there."

"I'm sorry," Sandra Barclay said. "I'd like to help. But I'm certain that Sheriff Tolliver will protect your friend and see that he's given fair trial. There'll be no lynching."

"All right," Saunders said. "If

you won't do it I'll have to try. It's a long chance but I got to get him out. They'll hang him inside of a half-hour if I don't. I've seen mobs before, miss."

Saunders let the girl out, and her dark gaze was troubled as she saw the look on his rugged face. Saunders strapped on his gun-belt, adjusted the two holstered guns on his thighs, and took a deep hard breath. Then he walked out and down the stairs. With that crowd swarming the streets he had a chance to make it. . .

SLIM RAND was looking out through the bars when Sandra Barclay came out of the City Hotel and hesitated on the porch. She stood looking straight up at his window, and Slim waved instinctively. The girl's eyes roved up and down the crowded street then as if searching for someone. . . Slim Rand started violently as he saw Milt Saunders cross an alleyway. Slim's hands gripped the bars tight, until his whole body ached with the strain. Milt Saunders was coming after him, staking his two guns and his life against all Waco County.

Saunders came out from between two buildings and melted into the crowd. Slim Rand's eyes went back to Sandra Barclay, and he saw the look of horror on her face even before Ham Struthers' great bellowing voice rose above the general din. Struthers already had his gun out but the throng blocked off his target. Milt Saunders spun smoothly about and flashed his right-hand gun. The crowd split apart to leave an open lane between the two men, and Saunders' gun blazed first. Struthers' massive body seemed to rear and swell as the slugs struck him, and he fell in a long staggering run, the porch rail breaking beneath his bulk. Struthers' one and only shot threw dirt over Saunders' boots.

But Lem Keech was firing now from the doorway. Milt Saunders drove Keech inside with a couple of fast shots, and Saunders cut for the shelter of an alley. Then Kyle Jason opened up from in front of the Lucky Dollar Saloon, and Saunders was caught between two fires. . . Slim Rand's hands wrenched and tore at the iron bars in an agony of helpless fury.

Kyle Jason's bullets sent Saunders reeling against a wall and he hung there, hit bad. Saunders lifted his gun with a terrible effort and lurched back towards Kyle Jason. The window behind Jason's checkered shirt crashed and fell, but Jason was still up and shooting.

Then it was that Paul Tolliver stepped out and, aiming deliberately, shot Milt Saunders in the back.

Saunders pitched over frontwards and sprawled on hands and knees, his gun flying clear. Blindly Saunders groped forward to recover the weapon, and Sheriff Tolliver's careful bullet shattered the reaching arm. Saunders rolled over onto his back and pulled his left-hand gun, but Tolliver and Jason and Keech were all blasting away at him, and Saunders shuddered back in the dust and was still.

Slim Rand closed his eyes and dropped his forehead against the brick wall, his hands fastened like claws to the bars of the window. He had seen many shootings and deaths, but nothing had ever shaken him like Milt Saunders' last fight. . . Slim Rand said slowly: "Tolliver, you'll die for this if I have to get you barehanded and with the cuffs on. Jason and Keech, too. . ."

The street was in an uproar. Tolliver and his deputies stood over Saunders' body, with hundreds of men pushing and shoving to get in closer. The smell of burnt powder was on the air. Big Ham Struthers lay where he had fallen. Men were praising and cheering Tolliver, Jason and Keech, slapping them on the back.

Sickened, Slim Rand turned from the window and walked toward the grilled door. There came the quick tap of running feet and Slim's gray eyes went wide with amazement. Sandra Barclay was there at the door, and already a key was grating in the lock. The door swung open

with a dull clang, and the girl thrust gunbelt and guns at him.

"Come fast," she said. "They'll be after you next. There's a horse for you out back. Come, I'll show you the way."

"But why are you doing this?" Slim Rand asked wonderingly.

"He asked me to. Saunders did. . . I wasn't going to do it, but I saw them murder Saunders down there. It was brutal, cold-blooded, awful. And I saw Paul Tolliver, the look on his face, when he shot Saunders in the back. It was the look of a wild beast without heart or soul. It was as if I saw Tolliver for the first time in my life." Sandra Barclay shuddered. "Thank God I found out in time."

"I want to thank you for this," said Slim. "And I promise you won't be sorry for doing it."

THE girl swiftly scanned Slim's lean brown face, the clear gray of his eyes, the clean angles of his jaw and chin. "You know who the outlaws are? Saunders said you both knew."

"I know," said Slim Rand. "And I reckon all Waco will know pretty quick now."

Sandra Barclay said with sudden decision: "Here we are, out this way. I'm riding with you. Maybe I can help a little. I can ride and shoot. You lost your pardner. . . And I can't stand Silver City—or Tolliver—after what I saw today. I want to get away, and I want to help you. Will you take me along?"

"Saunders would be proud to have you," said Slim Rand gently.

There were days of hiding out in the hills, while posses scoured the countryside in search of the escaped prisoner. And there were nights of silver under the moon, a campfire burning, the sweet-smelling pines around them, hours of friendly talking or friendly silence.

Tolliver was bent on beating the brush until Slim Rand was taken again. Tolliver had lost Billy Birch, Olin Varick, Ham Struthers, the gambler Borden, Charley Gavin, and Hyde. Six of his men killed, and only two lives taken in return: Tobin's and Milt Saunders'. Tolliver swore that Slim Rand would hang the instant he was captured again. Stricken by the strange disappearance of his daughter, Old Man Barclay pushed the hunt with the pressure of frenzy, and often the baying of bloodhounds sounded in the forest aisles.

Slim Rand did some scouting of his own, and one evening his rope fell over the shoulders and arms of a lone rider. Slim trussed the man so that a twist of the rope brought painful force upon joints and muscles, and before long the sweating gasping man was ready to talk. He was a new deputy named Hildrick and with a little prompting he revealed what Slim Rand wanted to know.

Slim left him bound securely to a tree, saying: "I'll see that you're cut loose before you choke to death or starve."

Back in the hideout Sandra was waiting and Slim Rand said: "I learned all I need to know. The time's come when we go back to Silver City. This is the show-down, Sandra."

"Can you do it, Slim—alone?"

Slim grinned. "With your help, sure. We can't lose."

"I hope I don't lose my nerve and ruin everything," the girl said.

"You won't," said Slim. "You'll be all right. You'll be fine!"

The morning was bright and hot, and Silver City sweltered. Sheriff Tolliver was in conference with Old Man Barclay at the president's desk in the bank. The clerks were at work counting the large shipment of money that had just come in. Kyle Jason and Lem Keech leaned against the wall, thumbs hooked into belts, cigarettes hanging from their lips. Faces shone oily with sweat in the heavy heat. Only Paul Tolliver looked cool and immaculate as ever.

Four men made a casual entrance. Two of them rolled cigarettes and exchanged words on the weather with the deputies. The other two went over to the cashier's cage where

the money was being counted and stacked. Suddenly guns glinted in the hands of the four visitors. One man covered Jason and Keech; another took Tolliver and Old Man Barclay. The two at the cage had their six-shooters trained on the clerks.

Both Kyle Jason and Lem Keech moved to draw, and Jason nearly went through with it. But they were beaten, didn't have a chance. Tolliver's right hand jerked, but the outlaw's forty-five prodded him roughly into submission. The clerks, sweating palely, were shoving money across the counter, and one of the outlaws was stuffing it into money-bags on the floor.

The outlaws twitched 'round like puppets on a string as the front door opened, and Sandra Barclay walked in. "Why, what's this?" she asked in fright. "What's going on here, Dad?" One of the outlaws snarled: "Never mind! Shut your mouth and stand by the wall there." All eyes were on the girl.

A door at the rear of the room swung sharply open, and Slim Rand came through with a gun in each hand. The outlaws whirled and stared. Slim Rand said: "Drop everything, boys." Slim saw a grimy hand tighten on a gun and he fired fast. The man's knees buckled and he fell slowly forward, limp across the money-bags on the floor. "Drop 'em quick," said Slim Rand to the others. Three revolvers clattered to the floor. . . The gun that Sandra Barclay was holding now looked absurdly large in her hand.

"Sandra, what are you doing?" cried Old Man Barclay. "Are you insane? Put up that gun."

PAUL TOLLIVER stepped forward, smiling. "All right," he said. "I'll take charge here. You folks were just in time."

"Stay right where you are, Tolliver," said Slim Rand. "And keep those hands up. You and your two boys are in on this little play."

"What do you mean?" demanded Old Man Barclay. "Has everybody gone crazy? The sheriff—"

Sandra Barclay spoke clearly: "The sheriff is the leader of this gang, Dad. A thief and a killer."

Tolliver snarled like an animal, his

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right hand whipping down. Holding hard and steady on Tolliver's chest Slim Rand turned both guns loose. Tolliver shivered from the impacts and his big frame sagged. Hands clutching his broken body, eyes wild with fear, Tolliver fell headlong across the desk and slid to the floor.

Kyle Jason's gun was clear and blazing as Slim Rand wheeled on him. A slug struck Slim's shoulder with the shocking force of a club, throwing him back against the counter. Slim Rand's guns roared again and Kyle Jason wilted against the wall, writhed slowly downward, lurched out to fall on his face. Lem Keech was running out the door when Slim's bullet caught him. Keech staggered on across the sidewalk, tripped over a hitching-rack, and plowed the dust of the street.

"I guess that's about all," said Slim Rand, "for now."

The other three outlaws stood back with their hands up. The room was thick with powdersmoke and queerly silent after the racket of the guns. Sandra Barclay was pale and wan, leaning weakly to the wall, her face hidden. Old Man Barclay crouched over his desk, a ghastly look on his face as he shook his silver-haired head in disbelief of what he had just seen. . . On the floor were Tolliver, Jason and the hold-up man, and outside a crowd was already gathering around Lem Keech.

Slim Rand held the guns on the outlaws while the clerks handcuffed them. The dark splotch was spreading on the shoulder of Slim's shirt, and his face was drawn white under the suntan and his grin was pathetic.

Slim Rand said: "Mr. Barclay, will you take over here? I'm kind of groggy. . . And Sandra, this is no place for you, girl."

Sandra Barclay looked up and buried her brave smile in Slim's good shoulder. "Anywhere you are," she said, "is the only place for me."

Old Man Barclay, a week later, watched Slim Rand walk away from the bank, and there was admiration and respect in the Old Man's face.

Slim's right arm was in a sling, and he carried only his left-hand gun. He was conscious of the sheriff's badge on his shirt, and it both embarrassed and amused him. Men turned out of their way to greet him as he crossed the street, and they told the uninformed: "That's Slim Rand. Single-handed, he cleaned out the Silver City gang. Tolliver and his deputies were outlaws. Slim Rand shot Tolliver, Kyle Jason, Lem Keech and another fellow in one session at the bank. They say you never saw nothing like Slim with the six-guns."

Slim glanced back at the bank building and smiled gravely, thinking: We came here to rob the bank, and end up by saving the bank instead. Funny the way things turn out sometimes. . .

THE storekeeper whom Slim Rand had talked to his first day in Silver City called out from the porch: "How's that arm coming along, Slim? Say, you look pretty good with that badge on your chest, son."

Slim scooped a handful of dried apple and chewed on it. "Don't you laugh at me, mister. There's enough people round the country would laugh if they could see me with this badge."

The old storekeeper scrubbed his bald head. "Well, no need of a man back-tracking just because he's run into a little trouble here and there along the trail."

"I guess you're right," Slim Rand said. Then his lean face lighted up and his gray eyes were warm and happy. He nodded his head in the direction of Sandra Barclay, who was coming down the street in the sunshine, dark and vital and good to look at. The storekeeper nodded in strong approval and his wrinkles deepened with his grin.

"I suppose some would say my troubles have just begun," said Slim Rand. "But I figure it's worth taking a chance. Seems like I kind of thrive on trouble anyway."

THE END

"Cat Smith's one of the worst badmen ever to ride the trails . . ."

WOLF SHACKLES

By Clell Worland

Lee Rillard didn't like being constable of Tiprock—even though there was a lot of easy money to be made undercover that way. But the payoff came when he jugged a hombre by the name of Jones!

AFTER Lee Rillard, constable of Tiprock, had completed his regular Saturday night chore—that is, had jailed the inebriated person of "Thirsty" Doyle—he drifted back to the Silver Spur Saloon, and had a free drink with the owner of that small, pretentiously named place more commonly referred to as the Dirty Floor or the Trough.

The most respectable citizens of

the little cowtown often expressed a desire to rid themselves of the Silver Spur and its owner, plump, greasy-looking Joe Fleming. Several citizens would liked to have rid their town of its constable, too. However, nobody else wanted the job, so tall, gangling, stoop-shouldered Lee Rillard, who had friends among a certain element, kept on wearing his tin star.

"Have another one, Lee?" asked Fleming, pleased by the way business was running this particular Saturday night. Fleming didn't wait for the answer he was sure of. He filled a muggy little glass and slid it across the moist bar.

All night long, on his circles, as he called them, Rillard dropped in at the Silver Spur. It was three o'clock in the morning when he leaned against the bar and had his fifth free drink.

"How about change on that ten-dollar bill, barkeep?" spoke up a big, deep-voiced man who, garbed in dirty overalls and flannel shirt which bore smears of green paint, looked as if he might have been a sheepherder that had just finished a branding job.

Ignoring that terse question put to him, Joe Fleming said, "About ready to turn in for the night, are you, Lee?"

Again the gangling constable had no time to reply. The big stranger at the other end of the bar was calling more adamantly this time, "How about the change I've got comin' on that ten, barkeep?"

"I gave you your change!" Fleming rasped. "That's the trouble with you locoed sheepherders when you get a little drunk, you—"

"I don't get drunk on two drinks," came the reply. "But I do get my change. Or know the reason why!" The big man moved quickly, smoothly. Like a lion's paw, his right hand shot out and grabbed Fleming's thick wrist.

Heavy as he was, Fleming was yanked off the floor. Was drawn, fighting and struggling and swearing, to the top of the bar. The big man with the close-set ears, the broad, flat nose, now jerked Fleming to the floor.

"You goin' to dish out that change?" A pair of hands fastened themselves around Fleming's ample throat; tightened until they nearly lost themselves in the flabby jowls of the saloon keeper.

It was then that Lee Rillard—his tin star covered by an old leather coat—moved. And rather fast for him. He caught up a quart whisky bottle and brought it down on the head of the stooping man who had his back turned.

There was a grunt. A pair of powerful hands lost their grip as the big stranger, absorbing a jolt he hadn't expected, tumbled against the bar and sagged down.

"Damn him!" choked Joe Fleming, face purpled by rage and partial suffocation. "Stouter'n a mule—he is. And quick as a cat. Well, don't stand there gapin' at him, Lee. Slap some hardware on his wrists. I don't want him to wreck this place, and maybe both of us, when he comes to!"

"I'll put him where he'll cool off," Rillard said. And, a few minutes later, was shoving his groggy prisoner toward the little jail at the edge of town.

"What's your name?" Rillard demanded. "I've got to keep a record of—"

"Jones, maybe."

"Yeah. Sure. Or Smith. Well, Mr. Smith, you're findin' out there's law and order in Tiprock." Rillard's sunken chest filled out a little.

"You'll find out somethin' when you take these handcuffs off me," rumbled the prisoner. "I'll pick you up by the heels and smash your damned brains out against a rock—if you've got any brains. Then I'll tend to that other buzzard, that short-changin' barkeep friend of yourn!"

RILLARD was suddenly a little nervous, alarmed at the prisoner's recuperative powers. He didn't want this man to get loose. The constable quickly unlocked the jail door—there were no cells inside the log-

walled place—and thrust his prisoner inside.

"Company!" g r u n t e d Thirsty Doyle, the little prisoner who had been jailed earlier, but who was now sober enough to be sitting up. "Turn me outa here, Rillard. I'm sober—" Thirsty stopped to look at the other prisoner who, hands shackled behind his back, turned and faced the lighted match which the constable had struck.

"Come on, Thirsty," Rillard commanded. "You promise to go on back to your cabin and I'll let you out."

"Take these handcuffs off me first!" rumbled the new prisoner.

That sounded like a challenge, one which Rillard deemed it unwise to meet.

The constable said, "Come on, Thirsty!" And Doyle was seen moving past the lanky man who closed and locked the door.

"Thanks," Thirsty said, trying to walk straight. "And thanks some more, Mr. Rillard, for handin' back that five-dollar bill I had in my hip pocket when you locked me up. That's the third time, and within this last month, you've helped yourself to my pockets."

"You drunken coyote!" growled the constable. "I'm gettin' sick and tired of havin' you accusin' me of—Come on! You're goin' back to jail. And this time you're goin' to stay there till—"

"No!" Thirsty backed away, or tried to. But Rillard grabbed him by the neck and shook him.

The constable said, "You had a five-dollar bill last night. But you spent it buyin' drinks for yourself, and a couple other tramps, over at the Silver Spur. I can prove that by Joe Fleming. I can also prove by Joe that I paid you five dollars—pay in advance, it was—for finishin' diggin' that little cellar behind my cabin. Now you'll finish that job, or you'll go back to jail. What'll it be, Mr. Doyle?" Rillard's hard-twisting hands tore the frayed collar of Thirsty's shirt.

"I—I'll finish the diggin'," replied the little man. "Monday mornin' I'll come over to your place and—"

"You'll come now. You'll start to work now. And you'll stay there till the job's done!"

Seeing that Thirsty Doyle was at work with his shovel in the dawnlight, Lee Rillard went in his cabin and stretched out on the bunk. It must have been about nine o'clock when the constable awoke to see Thirsty Doyle building a fire in the stove.

"I've got to have some coffee," said the little man.

"Make enough for both of us."

"That feller you jailed last night . . . Who is he?"

"Jones or Smith. Or maybe Brown. They're always that." Rillard exposed ugly, crooked teeth as he yawned.

"Ever see him before?" Thirsty said.

"Nope. Have you?"

"I—I don't know. I might've. Somewhere."

"You see lots of things—when you're drunk."

"Why didn't you take them handcuffs off him?"

Rillard didn't explain that it was sometimes less dangerous to catch a tiger by the tail than it was to turn him loose. He began to ponder about this latter task, speculate on the safest way to accomplish it.

THIRSTY sat by the stove and waited for the coffee to boil. He, too, seemed to be studying as he mopped his head with a bandanna, a head bearing a slanting scar which had long since healed. Thristy hadn't always been a shiftless drunk, a man who spent what little money he had

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at Joe Fleming's bar—and his Saturday nights in jail.

Although Thirsty never talked of it himself, it was rumored that he had once been a prosperous citizen in a neighboring state; that he had owned a well-located road ranch which, later, had grown into a little town. . .

"I've got it," Lee Rillard said. "That prisoner—we don't want no such sheepherdin' scum as him hangin' around town. We'll give him a chance to run."

"We?" Thirsty echoed.

"Yeah. We'll give him a chance to break jail. I'll take you back down there, pretend I'm goin' to throw you in again. But you get the best of me. Knock me down by the door, take my keys—and free your fellow criminal." Rillard grinned.

A few minutes later, that's the way it happened. Or almost. There were loud words near the jail door, then Thirsty felled the constable with the club he had brought along for that purpose. Only Thirsty made it too realistic. He bounced the club off Rillard's head with such force that the constable not only went down. He went out.

When Lee Rillard came to, several minutes later, he was wearing his own handcuffs. His head throbbed as he sat up and gaped at the open door. The gangling man staggered to his feet and headed for the blacksmith shop. Thirsty hadn't left the key to the handcuffs. They would have to be taken off with a file or a cold chisel.

A rancher, holding a half-broken horse which the husky blacksmith was shoeing, laughed as Rillard sheepishly entered the shop.

"Jail break," Rillard explained. "A big, overgrowed coyote of a stranger. If I ever ketch him in Tiprock again—"

"You'll probably run like hell!" The big blacksmith slapped grimy hands against his leather apron and laughed. "A fine-lookin' constable—you! Well, make yourself comfortable till we're through shoein' this horse. He's nervouser'n you are, Rillard. Jail break, eh? Who was this—"

"Jones, his name was!" Rillard growled.

It was nearly noon before Rillard was relieved of his handcuffs. There was still a lump on his head. Wait till he got hold of Thirsty Doyle again! He'd make that drunk wish he hadn't wielded a club with such force. He'd make him wish that—

Rillard thrust trembling fingers into his watch pocket. But the five-dollar bill he had placed there was gone. So was Thirsty. Yet, when the little man showed up again, he'd probably head for the Silver Spur Saloon. And with that same five-dollar bill he had "lost" last night.

Rillard headed for the Silver Spur now.

"Drink, Lee?" asked the proprietor, Joe Fleming, who seemed to be nursing a rather stiff neck this morning.

"A couple of 'em," growled the constable. "Maybe more!"

Rillard was still frowning, still drinking, when Charley McRowan, owner of a big cow outfit to the north of Tiprock, drove his buckboard up to the hitching rack and came into the Silver Spur for a drink.

LEANING against the bar, the cowman said, "Seems pretty quiet in this town after all the excitement down at Trailfork. They're makin' quite a hero of old Thirsty down there."

"Thirsty?" Lee Rillard jarred his glass, half-raised, down upon the bar again. "What's he done?"

"Not much." Charley McRowan smiled faintly. "He just rounded up one of the worst badmen that ever rode any man's range, and took him to Trailfork. Imagine a little feller like Thirsty Doyle bein' able to get the best of a big killer like Cat Smith—and tie his hands with an old belt."

"Kuh—Cat Smith?" Rillard choked.

"Yep. The same Cat Smith that murdered a sheepherder for a little money the other day—over by Antler Crick. A little money and a change of clothes. Yeah, and the same Cat

Smith that put that scar on Thirsty's forehead a few years ago. When the Smith bunch took all the money Thirsty had saved up from years of runnin' a road ranch. But Thirsty'll get some of it back. . . About three thousand dollars, I think the reward is on Smith."

Rillard gripped the edge of the sour-smelling bar and stared at Joe Fleming who, just as rigid, stared back and said nothing.

"Like hell Thirsty'll get that reward!" blurted Rillard, finally able to speak.

"Yeah!" shouted Joe Fleming, who had also gained articulation. "It was me and Rillard that ketched Cat Smith and—"

"It was me!" Rillard yelled.

"Listen to the vultures spreadin' their wings!" put in Bill Davis, the blacksmith who, having cut the handcuffs off Rillard, was now drinking beer at the far end of the bar. "If you had Cat Smith locked up, you didn't hold him, did you, Rillard? You said there was a jail-break, didn't you? And you claimed the prisoner's name was Jones, didn't you? . . . Well, good for old Thirsty. He told me he was goin' to straighten up some day, and here's his chance."

Rillard wilted, tried to brace himself with the drink he had set down on the bar. Then he shoved the empty glass at Fleming, his crony, and said, "Fill 'er up again!"

"Like hell!" Fleming rumbled thickly. "If you do any more drinkin' here, you'll put cash on the bar! You and me'd had plenty of cash, too, if you—"

"Here's some cash for you, Rillard," said Cowman Charley McRowan. He handed Rillard a little note. A note which, scrawled in Thirsty Doyle's handwriting, said: "Here is the five-dollar bill, you coyote. Keep it. I told you I thought I had seen a certain gent before. I hope you seen more stars than that tin one you wear when I busted you over the head with that club. Thanks for giving me the chance."

"Keep your rotgut, Fleming," Lee Rillard growled as he left the saloon.

Rillard walked back to his cabin. But, before entering that untidy place—and packing his clothes—he tossed into a half-dug celler an article that glinted in the sunlight. It was the tin star that Thirsty Doyle had mentioned, but one which Rillard would wear no more in Tiprock.

THE END

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Boot Hill Lark didn't mind being thought yellow, didn't hesitate to turn tail and run, when ordinarily his Colts would have been blasting away. He wanted to end his gun-trail, and go home. But when he arrived home, he found violence and gunthunder there, waiting on the doorstep!

CHAPTER I

BOOT HILL LARK was going home. He felt good about it, too. He sort of rolled his wide-spanned shoulders inside the quiet dark shirt and grinned into his glass when he drank. That made him feel self-conscious and sheepish. And he put up his big red ham of a hand and pushed over the straw-hued hair on his forehead. He was handsome in a thick-featured, animal way, with a confident glint

GUNSLINGER!

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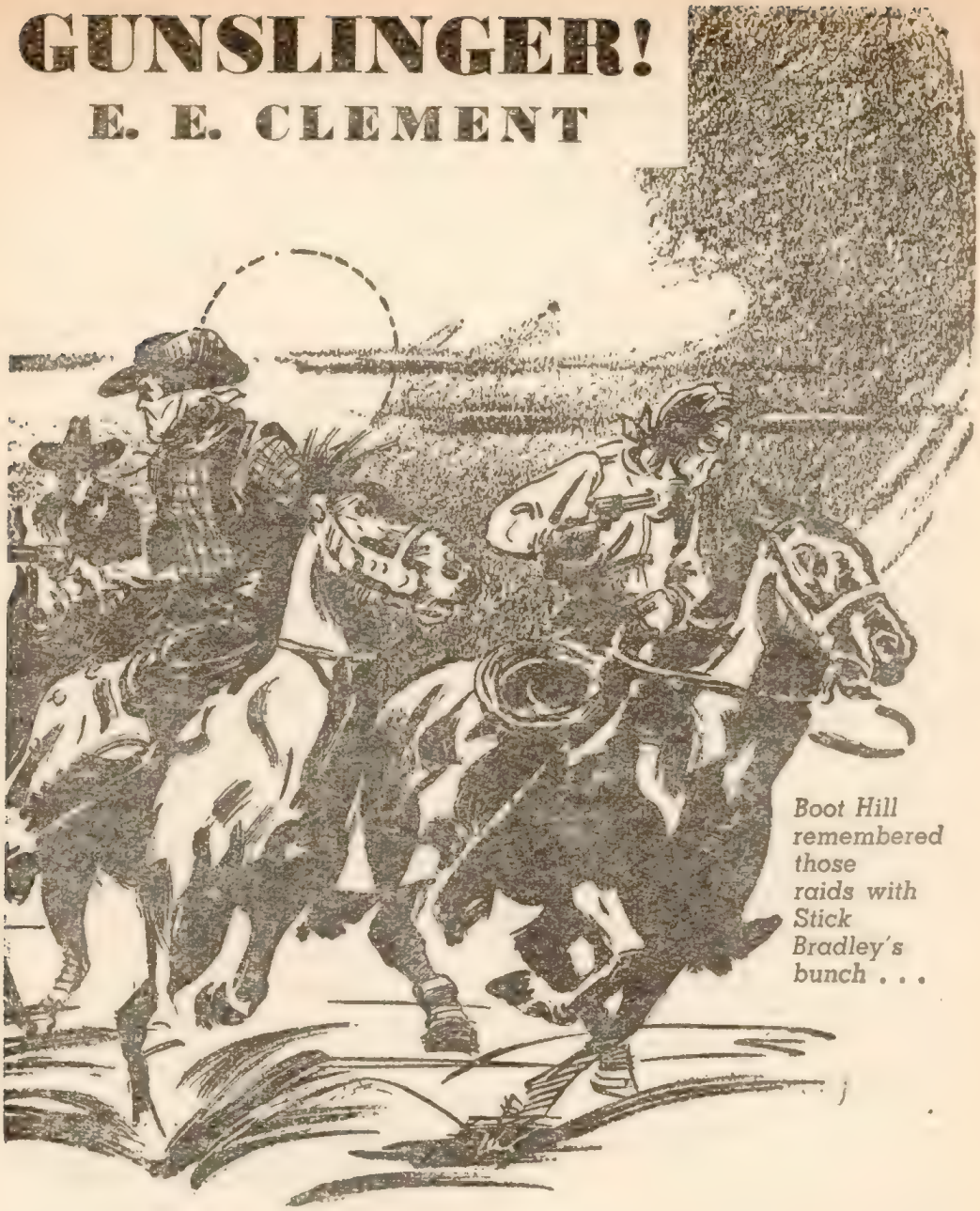

Boot Hill remembered those raids with Stick Bradley's bunch . . .

in his eyes. Then he had galvanized, though nothing about him stirred.

A man had come in the bat-wing doors from the sun-glaring street and stopped too suddenly. Then he had started to walk too lightly and quickly to be natural. The boys on the out-trails always said Boot Hill had ears better than hawk's eyes. Boot Hill was thinking quickly. If he faced the glare of the street, he wouldn't be able to distinguish a man's face for several seconds anyway. On top of that, the movement might be the warning to send the other in action. There was no chance of seeing what might be working around behind him either because the big bar mirror was covered with cheesecloth against the fly-specks in the summertime.

Then Boot Hill spotted the cat on the bar ledge behind the counter. It had been slipping along in front of the stacked bottles. Now it had frozen save for its yellow buttons of

eyes. They followed the silently moving newcomer. Lark's eyes followed the cat's eyes. The cat's tail weaved. Lark's left hand went out and around the bottle as if to pour himself another shot. A boot behind creaked. The old toothless man dozing at a table in the front corner stirred.

"Turn around, Lark — and keep your paws bar level!" The nasal spiteful voice whipped across the somnolent room.

"Sure," Boot Hill Lark drawled. And he came around slow-like, half grinning. Then his left arm slashed around with the bottle it gripped and it was bulleting at where the other stood even before Lark faced him or had really seen him.

Spider Brane had a gun levelled before his hip, but he had to duck the whirling bottle. And then before he could trigger, the big Boot Hill had slammed up a hand from his own holster with a cocked .45 in it.

"Something you wanted to speak about, Spider?" he asked sarcastically. The bottle bounced off a post and then fell softly into a sawdust box for spitting. The old coot up forward sat up and cupped a hand to his ear. But he was stone deaf anyway.

Brane sort of swallowed and pulled at his cadaverous face with a claw of hand. "I was going to give you a square break, Lark. But—you and me got something to settle. I don't like you around places where I am, Lark. You ain't good for decent lawful communities."

"Yeah?" drawled Boot Hill.

The skinny-limbed Lark nodded. "I'm sort of a lawman, too, you know. I could take you in."

"You—a lawman? Same's a slaver-jawed coyote, Brane. . . But you want to take me in—try it."

Spider Brane drew himself up. "I'm giving you a chance, Lark. Get drifting."

"What-t?"

"I'm telling you to pull stakes for the good of the community!"

A SLOW flush tided Boot Hill Lark's face then, and the big eyes lidded. You could see the man born with a savage temper, instinctively ever-ready to meet violence with violence. "You got a gun decorating your hand, Brane," Boot Hill's voice came from deep in his throat. "Run me out, if you want. . ."

The silence seemed ready to crack like something too brittle. Brane looked hard at Lark's gun. Then he sneeringly holstered his own.

"I'm no saloon-brawling tough, Lark," Brane said. "I give you fair warning. Get out of town. . ." He walked halfway to the door and turned. "I'm over in the Big Town, Lark. I'll come across the bridge at sundown, ready to draw. If you're still here—"

Boot Hill wagged a mocking finger at him. "Take a good look at that sundown, Spider. A good look. Because you won't be seeing many more."

Brane marched out, waving a fist once as he threw an oath behind him. Boot Hill turned back to the bar in time to see the bartender appearing at the head of the stairs from the cellar with a load of bottled goods in his arms. He had caught Brane's parting gesture and he could see Boot Hill Lark standing with gun still bared.

Boot Hill chuckled. "Just an old friend trying to show me a new trick on the draw, mister. I dropped that bottle. Set me up another." But his face went grim and worried when the barkeep turned away.

Because he knew he wasn't going to meet Spider Brane at sundown. . .

Lark tossed off two drinks quickly to get rid of that cold dirty feeling inside him. He wasn't used to getting his heels run over from sidestepping trouble. He lit up one of those little black cigaros he favored.

He remembered how he had been thinking about going home just before Brane came in. But the odds would be all against him going if he killed Spider Brane.

Lark knew why Brane carried the grudge and had tried to jump him. It went back to a fight at Terra del Fuego, in its gambling quarter. A half-drunk horde from up on the hill, led by a handful of officers deputized

within the last hour, had come swarming in. Their avowed intention was to clean the place out and grab some of the wanted men there. But it was simply an excuse to loot and rob and maybe collect some bounty money. It had been a tough bloody ruckus. Brane's brother had been one of those blustering last-minute deputies. And Boot Hill had put a bullet in him that made him a cripple for life.

He hadn't even felt as if he were bucking the Law when he had done it. That night in the gambling quarter, the other Brane brother was as much a lobo as any man in the place. But he knew someday there would be a payoff. Spider Brane always boasted how his family was known as the Fighting Branes back where he came from. And he was a vengeful scheming cuss in the bargain.

"'Nother drink," Boot Hill called to the bartender. The latter was down at the end of the counter with the deaf old coot. The old gent was trying to tell what had happened and guessing at what had been said.

Boot Hill wasn't worried about what would happen if he and Spider met in the road and swapped shots. He was too confident in his own gun prowess, had faced better men's Colts' muzzles before. Spider might try some kind of a trick and undoubtedly was not alone in the Big Town across the river. But Boot Hill could have got friends within a couple hours' ride. It wasn't any of those things.

The point was that if he did bring down Spider, they might put on a man-hunt for him. And as a fugitive, he couldn't go home. He had determined upon that. Spider had influence in certain circles. Years back he had been a deputy sheriff in Munro County and rated a certain amount of standing because of that. Since then he had done odd jobs as a special officer, as a legal gunman hired to clean out tough spots. He stood in with the Law. If he were slain, the Law would be danged interested in who had done it. And especially so, were that man Boot Hill Lark.

They couldn't pin anything much on Boot Hill. But they knew he had ridden the owl-hoot trails and run with lobos. If he killed a semi-official agent of the law, they would be interested in looking him up and seeing how much they could hang on him.

And Boot Hill wanted to go home, to stay there. He had to have clean hands to do it.

HE could take a runout, of course. Just sneak away before sundown. His heavy lips curled at the thought. Still, it might have been worth it to get home all right. But that too was out of the question, because Curly was coming in some time tonight.

Curly was an old saddle pard who had ridden with him when they were both with the Stick Bradley bunch. A nice little bald gent who always carried a Baptist prayer book. He had done a short stretch in the Big House on a rustling charge. Now he was coming out to pick himself up a small place and settle down. Boot Hill and Curly had cached some of their dinero back in the hills once. Old Curly would need that now. And Boot Hill had gone and gotten it and had arranged to meet Curly here this night. It was right in Boot Hill's money belt now.

So he couldn't duck out from meeting Spider unless he wanted to miss Curly. There didn't seem any way out of it. The big man frowned through his cigaro smoke. Another customer came in and the barkeep did some behind-the-hand whispering to him. The customer began to study Boot Hill furtively and then he went out. The word, vague as it was, would get around.

Voices carried in from the footpath on the road. "Yep, in there. A gunslinger! Uh-huh....I tell you...."

A little later a white-mustached man came in with a big silver star on his calfskin vest. He was the Justice of the Peace of the Little Town. Its real name was Hendrix. But when it spread across the river and the railroad was brought in to

the development on the other side and that flourished and expanded, the folks over there called that Big Hendrix. The original part settled down to a drab somnolent existence. And the natives referred to the two sections as Big Town and Little Town. Big Town was where Spider was staying.

"Anybody around here seen Pinto Adams?" the Justice of the Peace asked. "He was orey-eyed again last night and threw his bed through the window of his room over at the Widow's boarding house. A day or two in the jail will cool him off, I reckon."

After the peace officer left, Boot Hill Lark got thinking. Then he chuckled out loud. He had the answer. "Hey, Al, gimme a bottle and to hell with a glass!" he roared abruptly. "Danged glass takes too much time." He put the bottle to his lips when he got it and gurgled deep as the barman watched with bugging eyes.

He snorted and glared at the bartender when he finally lowered the bottle. "Knew a fuddy-duddy school teacher fella once who used to drink red ink. Is that what you're selling here for whisky, pard?"

HALFWAY through the bottle, a couple of strangers came in. Boot Hill lurched down the bar and insisted one of them was a gent named Cal Rand from Dutchman's Bend who owed him twenty dollars. When the little man insisted he wasn't, big Lark rammed down the other's sombrero over his ears and then good-naturedly bought him a couple of drinks. Shortly afterward he gave a cuspidor a boot that sent it rolling out under the batwing doors into the street.

"Look here, stranger, you git tough in here and I'll call the—" the barkeep began.

"Aw, go kiss your grandmaw!" Boot Hill bellowed back. "This place is too danged tame for a curly wolf like me!" He slapped on his hat and went lurching out the doors after tripping over a chair and apologizing to it with a sweeping bow. Some of his old companions of the out-trails would have been amazed. They had seen him on more than one night drink every other man under the table, call for a half bottle of whisky to top off his breakfast, and then go about his business.

He had a few snorts in another place, called a horse-trader a so-and-so liar after an argument, threw a handful of silver in the proprietor's face, and reeled on from there. The sun was low in the west, already tinting a bloody hue the bluffs of the Big Town across the river. Boot Hill picked up a companion, then threw him in the horse trough and entered a third whisky mill.

It didn't take long after that. Already some of the townsfolk were peering in under the doors from a safe distance. He started to slug it down from another bottle minus the glass. Then he saw the white-mustached Justice of the Peace across the road and Boot Hill chucked the bottle through a front window of the place.

The peace officer marched in, a gun out, "Stranger, you aim to come along peaceful or have I gotta—" He looked a little worried.

Boot Hill Lark settled the issue for him by flopping into a chair and starting to snore. A few minutes later he was being escorted stumblingly down the road and into the little dobie jail. Lark sprawled on the Teton pole cot in a corner, apparently in a drunken stupor. He was in a second-floor cell overlooking the road.

After the John Law went downstairs, Lark tiptoed over to the barred windows. Purplish shadows were already creeping out over the alkali road like silently lapping tongues of water. He didn't have long to wait. Already a lamp flickered over the counter inside the hay and feed store across the street. A woman poked her head out a window further down and yelled in a reedy soprano, "John, dinner's on the table, John." It was sundown.

Spider Brane came. He appeared around the shed across the river,

leading his horse, and walked slowly across the bridge. His lean head was out-thrust and one hooked hand was curved with hair-trigger tension over an open-topped holster. And Boot Hill watched him from the cell window, grinning broadly.

A few knots of men were gathered before the bars along the short street, waiting and ready to duck. Because the deaf old coot had been the only witness to the altercation, nobody was certain just what was due to happen. Brane pulled up, legs wide-stanced, and barked at somebody to come out of a dusky alley.

"Come out—or I'll drill you pronto, coyote!" he snarled.

A gangling one-eyed idiot younker with no shoes edged out into view, gibbering foolishly. Then he threw the stick he held and scooted back into the alley. Upstairs in the jail Lark had to clap a hand over his mouth to keep from roaring.

Spider Brane continued his cat-footed advance. He halted before one barroom and demanded to know if Lark was in there. Nobody knew who he was talking about. He peered over the batwing doors and then went on. A window slapped down in a house behind him and he spun as if it had been a gunshot. He cleared his throat as if he felt ridiculous himself as he dropped his half-drawn Colts back into its scabbard.

"You lowdown bounty hunter," Lark snorted from his lookout, "you know I never gave it to no man in the back!"

Brane yanked down his pinch-topped sombrero and went on past the bar in which he had tried to jump Boot Hill. There was nothing much but a couple of hovels, a photographer's shop, and a weed-grown shell of a burnt-out barn beyond that. Then Spider Brane threw back his head and guffawed. He faced back toward the river.

"Come on, boys. The lily-livered polecat jumped town to save his hide," he called. And two friends, gents with tied-down holsters, came up from the cover of the river-bank and came to meet him.

Up in the jail window, Lark was black-browed but he whistled softly as he saw the pair. "So that was the game, eh...."

Darkness closed in. He heard Brane ride off. His trick had worked....

CHAPTER II

LARK called the peace officer upstairs and paid for the broken window handsomely, said he was danged sorry and wondered if maybe he could buy a bottle so they could split a few drinks. During the night, Curly came down to the jail and saw him. He had known Curly would be able to track him down if he were in the town. He turned over Curly's share of the cache to him, and an hour before dawn he got the peace officer to release him—just in case Brane might have learned of his whereabouts and be snooping around when he was supposed to be released later.

He didn't want any part of trouble. He just wanted to get back home and settle down. He whistled in the pre-dawn drizzle as he took the upper fork beyond the town in the saddle of his big steeldust horse. It seemed like ages since he had slipped away from that home in the night to take the trail on his own.

It hadn't been his own home, exactly. It had been Pete's place, a scrubby run-down ranch outfit. Just a hundred head of bony cow critters and a paintless house that rattled in the wind, not a decent piece of pasture land on it. Pete was his brother, an even fifteen years older. Pete had taken him to live there after his parents had died when he was little more than a baby. Pete had been good to him, but it wasn't that.

As he had gotten older, he got to looking around him. There was Pete working like a dog to hold the place together with one old cowhand, almost falling asleep in his plate at the supper table nights. Getting gnarled and growing tight-lipped with the strain. Going into town with hat in hand figuratively, in his

darned-up black suit, to plead with the bank for another extension on his notes.

And Sarah, Pete's wife, hands cracked and work-worn, hair a little grayer and cheeks a little less rosy each year. Getting up at dawn and taking care of the two babies and helping out in the barn at times, always trying to look cheerful as she went about in her faded calico dresses. Boot Hill could still remember the time she wept silently looking at the pretty things in a mail-order catalogue.

And then there was the boy, little Anson, with that strange ear affliction. The local pill-roller would call around and say how the child should be taken to see one of those specialist fellows up in the city. But Pete could never quite scrape together enough to afford it.

BOOT HILL, christened Hannibal, had seen those things. Had seen life dragging down and sapping the strength from their very veins. And he had said to himself, "This ain't for me." He hadn't meant to be selfish or cruel. But he couldn't see how they were ever going to win, his brother and his wife. The years would beat them out right down to a gravestone.

Then he'd been up in town, Cully's Hill, one day and met that stranger passing through. Big fat laughing hombre called Record. He was rigged out in a fancy outfit Pete Lark couldn't have bought without selling off his whole herd. Record had taken a shine to him when he saw him scrap it out with the town bully, the saloon keeper's son, a younker twice his heft, and finally down him in the ragweeds of the gutter.

"Smart young beardless button with nerve like you can git somewheres, boy—less'n he'd rather bust his back digging post-holes for life. ...Shame for a fella like you to be wearing an old hat like that with his hair sticking out through a hole in the crown, I say." Record winked wisely. "Don't see me wearing duds like that."

That did it. Boot Hill had sent back a note to Pete and gone down the line with Record. That had been nine years back.

After a while he had broken off with Record. Record had specialized in holding up small barrooms and stores in isolated towns where there were no banking facilities. Another trick of his was to follow out the heavy winner in a gambling hall and jump him. Lark had thrown in with a small owlhoot bunch and earned his nickname, Boot Hill, then. They had attempted to hold up a big mining town bar and dance-hall, lining up the whole place. Something had gone wrong on the getaway. And young Lark was found holding off a mob of maddened miners among the head markers in the local cemetery when some of the bunch cut back to his aid. After that, he was always "Boot Hill."

They broke up and one day Boot Hill got in a ruckus with a liquored-up gunslinger reckoned one of the toughest out of the Washita country. Boot Hill shot him dead and was hired by the town to clean it up for five hundred dollars. He did and drew a like offer from another place up the line. It was after that, that Stick Bradley, leader of one of the strongest lobo bunches in the state, asked him to ride with them. Boot Hill held out for a special cut in the loot and got it.

The years had gone fast. Bradley was killed and the bunch split up, five of them riding under Lark. They went out only after big stuff, usually working with somebody on the inside through bribes. The take had been rich.

And then one day he just up and told the boys he was quitting. He had an overpowering urge to go back and see the only ones he could call family. He was wealthy enough to get a nice outfit to settle down on. He had come a long way from Cully's hill and the Monetto Strip. So he figured there wasn't much chance of the Law trailing him back, especially across a state line. He had killed but two men, both killers themselves. That had been when he was serving

as a special officer to clean out those towns.

"WONDER if they'll recognize me?" he mused half aloud as he sat eating in a Chino restaurant that next night. He had changed plenty since riding out of Cully's Hill. He had been a lank stripling of a younker then without his full growth. Sort of shy acting with teeth that looked too big for his mouth. Used to stutter sometimes with nervousness. Especially when, when in town, he would go and hunker down on the steps of the minister's porch and make calf eyes at his daughter, Mary Ann. He had never forgotten the way her blue eyes danced when she teased him, and he got flustered.

Yes, he had changed. He was man-sized, husky as an animal and with the confident vitality of one. There was a hint of arrogance in the drawl with which he spoke. And as for women, he had a half-laughing way of looking at them that made them grow flustered now. When he went to see Mary Ann again, it wouldn't be as the brother of a two-bit rancher any more. He had something to offer her.

He'd lend Pete—Pete would be too stubborn-proud to take it as a gift—dinero to put himself on his feet and fix up his rancho. Then he'd take them into town—no, up to the big place on the river. Sarah would have some new dresses. And there would be toys and clothes for the kids. Of course, he'd have to tell Pete some kind of a windy about getting in on a silver strike or maybe buying cows below the line and bringing them over at a fat profit. But it would be swell going back and—

He was putting his fork to his mouth when he saw an hombre jump back from sight outside the restaurant front window. Boot Hill gave no sign, lowering and filling his fork again. But his right hand had whipped beneath the table and had the .45 on that side out and laid across his lap. He kept on eating. A couple of minutes later two men came out of the dark of the street of the little town at the mouth of the canyon and walked in.

Boot Hill glimpsed them beneath the lowered brim of his flat-brimmed black Stetson and knew then. They were Holy Joe Wince and Little Packy of the old Bradley bunch. Boot Hill looked up, at them, and past as if they were strangers.

"IF IT ain't ol' Boot Hill himself," Holy Joe said, keeping his voice down. "How're things, fella?"

"You're lookin' plumb fat and sassy, Boot," Packy said.

Boot Hill took a swig from his java as if they weren't speaking to him, then glanced around to call the Chinee boy.

The pair exchanged a quick guarded look. "Don't you know your old friends, Boot?" Holy Joe said, shoving out his hand.

Boot Hill Lark looked up, surprised. "Talking to me, stranger?"

Little Packy leaned over the table. "What's the matter, Boot—the Law on your coat-tails?" he whispered.

"Reckon you gents got me mixed up with somebody else."

Holy Joe's lip curled at the end of his mouth where the scar was. "What kind of a bluff are you trying to run on us, Boot? We was saddle pards once with Stick Bradley." Holy Joe had a quick violent temper.

The seated man picked up his fork and speared a hunk of steak. "Stick who?"

Holy Joe switched around a chair and bestrode it. "What the hell is this, Boot? You know dang well we ain't John Laws. Now, wait. I know you and me never rubbed too well together. But, look. We got something planned out just over the Basin way. It's a chance to get our dewclaws on a real chunk of dinero. We got two pards outside. But you're just the hairpin to rod this job and—"

Boot Hill put down his fork and flattened his left hand on the table. It drew attention to the little finger that had been chopped off halfway

down by a slug. And that had happened after the Bradley outfit had busted up and he had quit the company of these two.

"Gents, either you or me is plumb blind orey-eyed. And I ain't had a drink all day," he said with a puzzled smile.

Little Packy dropped his jaw. "Ain't you Boot Hill Lark?"

"My name is Lark. Samuel Lark, though. Mebbeso you're referring to a cousin of mine. He did go bad. And I recall hearing something about him being known as Boot Hill—the no-good lowdown coyote. He never did pay back the dinero he borrowed from my father."

Holy Joe glanced down at the lopped-off little finger. "Oh," he said, standing up. "Right sorry to have troubled you. Come on, Packy." He led the way out.

Inside, Boot Hill Lark wiped sweat from his forehead. He wanted to go home clean, without any strings of his owl-hoot past hanging onto him. If he hadn't been put on guard by the figure darting back from the window, he might have betrayed recognition before he caught himself...

Outside, walking down the road, Little Packy shook his head. "Gee Whillikins, for a cousin, he sure looked a heap like old Boot. But that fella had his little finger cut off and—"

"You dang idiot, it was Boot Hill himself," Holy Joe spat angrily. "Gunslingers often get a finger knocked off."

"How do you know it was him. It couldn't—"

"It was. Didn't you notice him eating with his left hand? Boot Hill was always left-handed. It's him... We'll trail him out when he leaves and see what he's up to. Too danged good for us, eh...."

CHAPTER III

WHEN Lark left town in the night, he headed northward into the canyon. The pony hoofs striking on the shaly bed echoed off the precipitous rock walls that gleamed faintly in the wan moonlight. The meeting up with Holy Joe and Little Packy preyed on his mind. After half an hour, acting on a hunch, he drew in behind a jumble of big boulders that lay behind a sharp elbow in the canyon side and dismounted behind some tall green and yellow mescal plants topped by their starry blooms. He put a match to one of his cigaros and waited.

An owl hooted up on the canyon side. A little while passed. Then Lark quickly pinched out his cigaro, his keen ears picking up the faint jingle of bridle chains. The approaching riders came off the sandy stretch of the bottom and he could pick up their hoofbeats as they reverberated off the stone walls. He levered out one of his guns. They came around the jutting elbow of the canyon, Holy Joe with his pinch-topped sombrero and Little Packy sitting stooped in the kak.

For a moment, Boot Hill toyed with the idea of jumping out and covering them from the rear and raising hell. Then he thought better of it. After all, they had no way of knowing to where he was headed. He let them go on up the canyon. And then he mounted and rode back the way he had come.

He would take the road east from the settlement at the mouth of the canyon and swing in a loop. It would take him a little longer, but he meant to go home with his coat-tails free. But his nerves were jumpy when he got back to the settlement and he wanted a couple of quick drinks. Leaving his steeldust hitched behind a clump of alders at the edge of the place, he eased up the dark single little street quietly, hugging the deeper shadows. It was just possible that Spider Brane had picked up his back-trail too.

A man stepped out the half-open door of the livery barn and turned and moved swiftly along the rutted street. There was something guarded about him, also something resembling the stringy thin-limbed build of Spider Brane. Boot Hill cursed under his breath and faded over to the

trunk of a eucalyptus tree a moment. It might have been better had he taken a chance and settled with Spider back up in Hendrix.

Then he saw a figure detach itself from the blanket of darkness of an alley across the road and glide along watching the man who had come out of the livery stable. A moment after, a man rose from behind a horse trough not twenty feet ahead of Lark and shadowed that other too.

BOOT HILL sucked in his breath. It looked as if they were setting up a dry-gulching job. He jerked at the flat brim of his sombrero and moved lightly after them before he thought. Outlaw, he might have been. But he never had held with gunning an hombre between the shoulder blades.

The one who had emerged from the barn was silhouetted momentarily as he shoved open the door of a little ramshackle barroom and the yellow light flooded out. The door squeaked shut.

The two trailing hombres abandoned furtiveness and ran over quickly toward it, joining. Then a third figure, the pinpoint of fire of a quirly butt revealing him in the dimness, came from the other direction and joined them. Crouched, Boot Hill crept in closer but could not pick up what they were saying. Then one of them chuckled and lifted his voice.

"All right. Jeb's already inside there. We're ready to hang the deadwood on him. This'll be easy as spitting over a log."

Another said, "Sure. Slip in the back way, silent, and we'll stampede him for keeps."

The one with the cigaret butt in his face nodded and disappeared around the side of the place. The first two loosened their hoglegs in the tied-down holsters and pushed open the door. For a heavy man, Boot Hill Lark could move with amazing speed. He was up there and on the single step and catching the door before it quite slammed on the latch, then sidling inside the place quickly.

It was a drab low-ceiled whisky mill, ready to close up. The bartender was yawning behind the counter as he took off his flour-sack apron: The old swamper was up on a chair extinguishing one of the lamps in the back of the place. The sole customer was lifting his drink at the bar, the man who had emerged from the livery barn. He was a sawed-off gent, middle-aged, with a prodigious hook of red nose. He had hands big enough to choke a bull.

THE pair who had been trailing him were halfway across the floor to him as Lark flattened against the front wall. Then the taller of the pair, a man with stooped shoulders and a spiked black mustache, roared out:

"All right, Todd, you danged sidewinder! Hoist 'em in the name of the Law! Special officer from the marshal's office. You're wanted for the killing of that cattle inspector over at Pine Springs."

The stubby man at the bar had not been taken off guard. He was already half turned and the hand on his far side was flattened over the walnut butt of his gun. "You're a ring-tailed liar, mister. I ain't been over Pine Springs way in two years," he flung back, face twisting behind that nose.

Boot Hill Lark hesitated but an instant. It was no business of his if the Law wanted this man. Then his hawkish eyes picked out the figure in the rear, clapping a hand over the mouth of the scared swamper as he crept in. It was the man who had gone around to the back, Silent. And Lark's eyes switched as he noticed the man apparently asleep at a table across the room for the first time. That gent's head had come up now. And the blue-black steel of his gun barrel levelled beneath the table gleamed faintly.

Lark knew it was no John Law game then. A lawman would have warned this Todd that he was surrounded and pointed out his men.

The black-mustached one hunched, "Put 'em up, Todd!"

"Got a warrant for me?" Todd snapped back.

"Naw—I only use holster warrants ....If you want to draw for it—"

That Todd's whisky glass hit the bar with a little tinkle as the bartender dived out of sight. Todd's far hand whipped up with his gun. With a smirk, the black-mustached one and his companion started to hoist their hands. They were just bait for the trap. Todd never had a chance, never would have were not Boot Hill there.

His two big hoglegs seemed to leap into his trained fingers. And they blasted their lethal chorus simultaneously. The crash of them thundered in the room. The man skulking in the rear twisted and stumbled backward, grabbing at the smashed forearm of his shooting hand, his Colts bouncing on the floor. Jeb, half hidden over at the table, ducked and slid sideward out of his chair as Lark's bullet horneted past his hat. The latter couldn't draw bead on two spots at once so his slug had missed. But it had upset Jeb's aim and his chunk of lead hammered into the bar a foot from that Todd's body.

TODD was dumbfounded for an instant. "I'm with you, Todd!" Boot Hill roared through the smash of the reports in the room. Then he just flung himself sideward in time. For the black-mustached one had grabbed up a chair, whirled, and flung it. It splintered on the wall where Lark had been.

Then the gunfight was on in full fury. The pair who had entered just ahead of Lark ran toward the opening at the front end of the bar counter. A bullet plucked at the brim of Lark's black hat, Jeb shooting around that pole in the shadows. Boot Hill Lark dropped to his knees, fired back once but only nicked Jeb's cheek.

Todd had hopped back behind the other end of the bar. A shot from him drove the black-mustached one leaping from the front end of the counter. But the next instant, Todd himself reeled out onto the floor, hit in the side. The snaky Jeb had found the target.

Boot Hill spat an oath, his heavy lips curling. His left gun crackled its guttural song and Jeb rolled out from behind that post. The bullet had nailed him flush in the ear and two of his gold-capped teeth sprayed out on the floor from the shock even as he died. The next instant, Boot Hill himself was stumbling backward. A wild shot had shattered the empty bottle on the table before him and he instinctively pinched up his eyes against the flying glass.

There was a shout and the tinkle of more glass as somebody shot out the single lamp alight. Boot Hill got his eyes open and saw the black-mustached hombre in the flare of the burning oil dripping to the floor. The man was pointing his gun at the wounded Todd on his knees.

Lark and Black Mustache triggered simultaneously. Both their slugs hit. Black Mustache groaned like a bogged-down cow and pitched on his face. Then it was dark. The back door slammed. Lark turned in time to see a figure diving a window by the front of the bar. But somebody was moving on that floor. The ex-outlaw waited. After a few moments there came the pounding hoofs of two ponies busting the breeze out of the settlement.

Finally the bartender, pale as flour, came up with a lighted candle. Lark looked around. The Jeb gent, he knew, was dead. Black Mustache lay with his face resting on his still smoking gun. When Lark bent close to him, he saw that he too had cashed his chips. It was Todd who was stirring.

THEY got him propped up in a chair. But he was going fast, hit in the side and the chest. He managed to choke down some whisky, coughed feebly twice. "G-get me pencil—paper," he muttered. "G-gotta write message."

The trembling bartender dug it up. Somehow Todd managed to scrawl a few words. Looking over his shoulder, Boot Hill saw them. They read:

Cant come...Permanently detained..
K. Todd.

The pencil stub slipped from his fingers. They gave him some more whiskey. He blew a reddish bubble and lifted his eyes to Lark and nodded thanks.

"Y-you wouldn't be—be goin' over Cully's H-hill way—would y-you?" His eyes lighted up feebly when Lark nodded. "Th-then would you leave this at—Lone Star Saloon... give bartender." His head started to slip down. "T-tell him it—it's for Mr. B-bird." He pushed the note at Lark. Then he started to slip off the chair, waxiness already creeping over his face.

Boot Hill remembered what he was and how he wanted to slip back home without any trouble. He moved into the rear of the place and out the back as the first men pushed in the front door. Working back of the single street, he found his steeldust and hit the road going eastward. "Mr. Bird," he said aloud to stamp on his memory the name of the man to whom the note was to go...

CHAPTER IV

HE HAD forgotten some of the old trails and missed the turnoff that would take him north over the spiney ridge. So he had to retrace his route. After all, it was a long time since he had ridden out of Cully's Hill, a half-scared stripling out to make his fortune. It was near midnight the next day when he pushed his pony to the top of the long climb and looked upon the Monetta strip again. It was a big low mesa that stretched like a tongue into the southwest. A moon like a scimitar of bluish cheese hung low over the east of it.

Boot Hill found a spring that he remembered in those parts and let his horse drink, refilling his own canteen. Then he pushed on toward his brother Pete's Box-L place. He picked out landmarks as he rode. There was the forked chimney butte over to the east. And the string of low dome-like hills with their scrub growth where a good man with a rifle could get himself an antelope easy. The sight of those things warmed something inside him he thought he had forgotten. It would be good to return. He tried to picture the surprise on old Pete's face when he opened the door, lamp in hand, and saw him standing there. Probably wouldn't know him. Not at first, anyway.

He came to a creek he knew. It was dried up now. Never had been much water in it, not half enough for the stock of even a small outfit like Pete's. He dropped down into the crusted bed and followed it, thinking of the old days. The creek would take him to a cart-track that led right up to the ranch-house.

What he didn't know was that in a spring freshet a couple of years ago the creek had varied its course.

He thought of how Sarah used to force the sulphur and molasses dosage down his throat come every springtime. He looked around sharply, figuring he could have come to the cart-track by now. Over to the east lay the Fowler Brothers' fence-line. When he went away, they had been two old bachelors who sat around most of the time drinking red-eye in solid comfort.

He left the creek, trying to pick up the trail. Then he rode through a small shallow heavily wooded valley he recalled well. He could find his way from there all right. He was about to pucker his lips in a whistle when the low voices on the night reached him. Ahead in the moonlight, the barbed-wire of a fence gleamed. The old instinct of the outtrails made Lark slip from the saddle and advance cautiously. The little valley had fanned out almost level with the mesa surface.

A man swore hoarsely. Said, "we gotta git them cow critters to water. For more 'n one reason, too." He followed it with a chuckle.

Boot Hill pushed aside some foliage and peered through. On the other side of the fence-line a knot of riders were gathered. One man cupped a match to the quirly in his

mouth and Lark glimpsed a flat face with a bashed-in nose and brows that bumped like craggy knobs above the eyes. He also saw the gray hair at the temples. The match went out.

"You say he's waiting up there at the east water-hole, standing guard, eh?" It was the flat-faced man speaking. "Pete Lark there too?"

"No. He's home," a rider answered.

"All right," the first one said as his pony sidled nervously. "We're taking the cows through to that water-hole, hell er highwater! You two, you wait here a-whiles to give us a start. Then you slip through the fence here and swing 'round behind him. When we start to break the fence up there, you can jump 'em from behind. If you put a slug or two into him—well, I won't ask no embarrassing questions." He chuckled again. Then the main bunch moved off.

BOOT HILL LARK didn't need anybody to draw maps for him on what was going to happen. He waited a few moments, wondering if he could slip through the fence and jump the pair left behind. But they were hunkered down in a small stand of cottonwoods and would have every chance to pick him off if he tried to creep up under that moon. Hand over his pony's nostrils, he turned and worked back cautiously a couple of hundred yards. Then, mounted, he rode up the low valley side and behind a screen of second-growth yellow pine.

He knew where that east water-hole was. It took him about an hour at a hard gallop to reach it. He was about to sing out as he rode toward the low bluff that overhung it on one side. A figure rose from behind a clump of brush, Colts sticking from his hand.

"Keep your hands on that saddle horn, fella!"

"You one of Pete Lark's hands?" Boot Hill said.

"Yes. But who are—"

"Look. I was coming along by the fence in the little valley to the south and heard a bunch of riders talking on the other side. Their leader was a gent with a face flat as a dish—"

"That'll be Moss," the man on the ground said. He was tall and stringy, with a serious intense face. He was about Boot Hill's own age but the other never would fill out. "Yes, yes," he prodded nervously.

"They're coming to drive their stuff through the fence to this water-hole," Boot Hill told him.

"I figured they would tonight," the other pushed back his weather-warmed sombrero to reveal his straw-like hair. "They been doing it before, cutting the fence and slamming their stuff through. He looked at the bandaged wrist of his left arm. "I nicked a coupla of them, though. Killed off some of their cow critters, too."

"Odds are against you doing that tonight, mister. They are sending two men through the fence down below to come around and nab you from behind just as they hit the fence in front."

The other's face fell. Boot Hill noticed how he had big buck teeth, making him looking something the way he had himself as a younker. "I got just one cowhand here with me. All we got, anyway. I reckon I'll just have to stand 'em off long's I can."

BOOT HILL was already dropping from the saddle. The slim fellow stepped forward quickly and rammed his hogleg into the ex-outlaw's belly. "If this is some kind of a trick, I'll—"

"Look, fella. I'm—" He was about to say, "Pete Lark's own brother" when the rumble of hoofs came from the east. It was the cows across the fence-line, still some distance away, but coming. "Where's your other man?" Boot Hill demanded with the authority he was used to commanding among the men who rode under him. The other pointed over to the north side of the water-hole beneath them with its caked salt-crusted sides.

"All right," Boot Hill took command. "Tell him to work up close to the fence and lay low. Them two

sneaking in will expect us close to the hole. You and me, we'll wait in that clump of cottonwood back there and take 'em from behind when they pass us. Tell that other waddy to start banging away at the cows if he hears any gunshots back here. Sabe?"

The slim man was about to question him, then accepted his authority. He ran off, dropping over the side of the low bluff. In a few minutes he returned and followed Boot Hill, leading his steeldust, into the stand of scrawny cottonwoods.

"They been doing it afore, the Moss bunch," the slim man explained in his indecisive voice. "They's been some drought in these parts. But they don't need the water that bad. We—we ain't got such good water on our side of the fence."

Boot Hill remembered that. That was one of the bad things about Pete's place. There wasn't good water except in a marked wet season.

"Their stuff comes in here and laps up this hole dry. Then our stuff suffers," the other finished bitterly. "We—"

Lark dropped a hand on his arm. Something had stirred the high grass out by the low edge of the bluff the quick way the soft night breeze would not. The other levelled his gun. Boot Hill pressed it down gently. He was playing it as a lobo would. No sense in warning off the band across the fence and letting them pull out safely.

"And they's two of 'em," he reminded the lean gent.

Lark cupped a hand about his mouth and gave a soft bird call twice. And over at the far end of the bluff, the second man straightened and looked around inquiringly, wondering if it were a signal. Their plan was plain, to work around either side of the water hole and put a pincers on its guardians.

"COME on," Boot Hill said. They moved out and out toward the nearer man, Lark himself slipping along like a great cat. He carried a small chunk of wood in his right hand, his hogleg spearing from his left. They closed in on the south side of the water-hole. Ahead a boot grated on the crusted edge. Lark tossed the wood chunk off to the right. The skulker below straightened and turned that way.

Lark simply stepped off the little bluff, landed and pounced in two strides. His gun barrel came down on the other's head and laid him out flat. He splashed the water a little as he landed. But Boot Hill had already turned and was scuttling along in the shadow of the bluff toward the other end of it. The man down there had already come around it and was crouched in reeds close to the hole. He looked their way.

The lean gent behind Boot Hill lost his head and rode the trigger. Missed. The gun-snake down there fired. But a jet of flame-lightning ripped from Lark's gun. And the man went down, clawing at his throat. His head rolled into the water's edge and the latter ran red. His wind-pipe had been smashed by Boot Hill's deadly shooting.

The cowhand down at the fence was levering away with his Winchester as per orders, pumping slugs at the small herd of cattle that loomed out of the east. At the edges of the herd, Moss hands were driving them along, getting them at the run toward the fence. They figured their two dry-gulchers would strike any moment from the rear, driving out the two who would be at the fence.

Boot Hill started at a run for that fence. The moon had heightened and he could see freshly-snipped wire where somebody had come along and cut it under cover of the dried grass. The unsevered top strands would never hold those bolting cow critters. Lark's two guns began to snap at the leading shapes in the herd. Horns clicked and there were bawling cries from the animals as wounded ones dropped or tried to veer off to escape. But the riders on the flanks only drove them on the harder.

The slim man began to shoot from Boot Hill's side. But the latter cursed him bluntly and told him to

move down toward another break in the fence. Return lead was already zipping in the grass about them. There was no sense in bunching up and giving them a target. A slug just seared Boot Hill's thigh. But he paid it no heed as he shifted position, reloading swiftly.

A TRIO of cows just yards from the fence were dropped in their tracks. But the Box-L waddy down there was knocked out of the battle with a slug that creased his head and laid him out stunned. Boot Hill weaved forward, shooting as he went. From one knee, he took careful aim and struck the Moss rider on the left flank. The man was batted from the saddle and began to drag himself rearward.

Two more animals were drilled and went bawling off crazily to the north. And then the onrushing herd began to turn from this thing that chopped at them. A few did hit the fence broadside and crash through. But, rising, they swung into the tide of the veering herd and went off.

Two riders did come pounding up to try and head them fenceward again. But when a slug of Boot Hill's ploughed through the hat crown of the first, both turned and galloped rearward. Back there, the flat-faced Moss could be heard filling the night with curses.

But a few minutes later, the depleted herd, spreading, was swinging northward on Moss range. And the raiding cowhands had pulled out.

Boot Hill sleeved sweat from his face and trotted back to the waterhole on the side where he had flattened the man with a gun barrel blow. But the hairpin had gone and Lark caught the crashing of a horse full-tilt through the brush toward the south.

The slim straw-haired man joined him and they revived the cowhand with some water and tied up his head. He was a gnarled middle-aged gent and only cursed because he hadn't been around at the finish for another crack at the Moss bunch. "Old Tonopah ain't as tough as he used to be," he said. "But if they come back—"

Boot Hill swallowed some water and wished it were red-eye as he brought out his pony. The slim gent had brought his horse from hiding too. He started to thank Boot Hill Lark.

But the ex-outlaw cut him short. There was trouble abrewing in this country and he wanted to see his brother pronto. He drew out the note the dead Todd had given him.

"Fella, do you know a Mr. Bird over at Cully's Hill? Or maybe nearby in this piece of country? I was told to give this note to the bartender at the Lone Star Saloon and say it's for Mr. Bird."

The nervous slim gent reached for the note. "That's for me, then."

"Easy. You know who it's from."

"Man called Todd....We was communicating that way. . .You see, my name ain't really 'Bird.' I just used that. I'm Hannibal Lark...."

CHAPTER V

BOOT HILL almost swallowed the black cigaro he had just put in his mouth. "You—you—uh—" He wondered if he had gone locoed. Hannibal Lark—that was his own name.

"Sure. Brother of Pete Lark of the Box-L here." He had already plucked the ragged folded paper from Boot Hill's stunned fingers. He paled as he read it. "Well, we're finished. Moss has us whipped for fair now."

Tonopah frowned. "Hell, Hanny, we just whupped him good tonight."

"This is from Todd, the gunslinger us small ranchers hired. He won't be here tomorrow to help us protect our interests in the election. He—" The man who called himself Hannibal Lark looked at Boot Hill.

"Got killed in a shooting rackus," Boot Hill said automatically, studying the other hard.

"Know who did it?"

"There was four. I threw in with Todd. I got a gent called Jeb and one with a black mustache. But they got him."

"The one with the mustache was Gunner Salt. Him and Jeb was both Moss men. They must have learned somehow that Todd was coming in to help us....I—I got to tell Pete about it right off."

"I'll drift along with you," Boot Hill said.

They left Tonopah to guard the water-hole just in case Moss did make another try and moved northward. The slim one led the way onto the cart-track after they crossed a low rise. Boot Hill pulled in his pony to drop back, then slicked out a gun. The other saw him too late from the tail of his eye.

"Sit quiet—and live a while, anyway," Boot Hill told him. "You ain't Hannibal Lark, you fourflusher!"

The other's mouth tightened. "Sure I am. I—"

"Save the lying, fella. You ain't."

Indecision crept into the other's eyes. "How—how do you know?"

"Because I know Hannibal Lark pretty good myself. I—I rode with him." He didn't know why he said that last.

SOMETHING like intermixed relief and sadness came over the other's face. He nodded. "Yes, I was pretty sure I wasn't, myself. But I never quite knew for sure. They said I was—swore it up and down."

"Who?"

"Pete Lark and his wife, Sarah.... You see, Pete found me one night on the trail, wounded and unconscious. Been bushwhacked, I guess. All my dinero gone, anyway. When I first remembered anything. I was in bed at their place."

"What?" Boot Hill asked incredulously.

"That's God's truth. You see, I don't know who I am myself. I can't recall anything in my life before waking up at the Box-L ranch."

"What happened?"

The slim one Tonopah called Hanny went on, voice low and weary. Pete Lark had insisted he was his kid brother. Looked just like him when he vanished four years before. They had insisted on him staying on, assuring him he would remember.

"Then Pete got his leg pinched under a horse. It was just after he bought that piece of pasture land with all his savings. So I stayed on to help him run the place. Maybe I was his kid brother. I never knew —till now. I meant no harm. I've worked and fought beside Pete. He ....'s all."

With a motion of his gun, Boot Hill directed him to keep riding. They moved on a space. "Tell me about this trouble with this Moss. I thought that was the old Fowler range."

Hanny told him. The Fowlers had sold out to this Moss who bought because he had advance knowledge of the dam up north the state was going to build to water this valley. Moss' next move had been to try and force out as many of his half-starving two-bit neighboring outfits as possible to pick them up cheap.

"There's been plenty of trouble—like you seen tonight," Hanny went on. "Tomorrow's the election in town for a gun marshal to keep law in the country."

But Moss, with a spread of tough-bitten gunhands, had put up his own candidate, a whisky-swilling tinhorn he had in his pocket. The independent ranchers had their candidate, a young fellow who had been a deputy over in Cochise, Nobbins, a square shooter.

"There isn't a chance of our putting him in, though. The townsfolks are scared and will vote with what looks like the winner to protect themselves afterward. And Moss had dropped the word none of our bunch will be allowed to vote. He's got his gunhands to back it. That's why we hired that Todd to come in. I'll have to tell my broth—I mean, Pete."

THEY rounded a bend in the trail and a faint light in one of the windows of the Box-L ranchhouse showed. Boot Hill saw that it had been painted and a couple of new rooms put on the side since he'd gone away. He reined in again, thinking.

"Look," he said suddenly, "I can be Todd for you."

"What do you mean? And say, you knew Hannibal himself. What's your handle?"

Boot Hill looked down at his saddle horn. "Call me Curly." After all, Curly had been a saddle pard of his. "Curly, yeah. I can play Todd. The Moss outfit'll think they just made a mistake and got the wrong hombre. I'm willing."

"Todd was one devil of a gunslinger," Hanny said hesitantly.

"I ain't so sluggish clearing a gun-iron from holster leather myself," Boot Hill said. "Hannibal always thought I was plumb fast. For—for his sake, I'll throw in with you and help."

Hanny leaned from the saddle to clutch his arm in gratitude. Then caught himself. "But what about me? I'm not Hannibal Lark and—"

"That can wait till later. Go up and tell Pete about this. Say nothing about yourself to anybody."

"Well, you come along too and—"

"I'll—I'll wait down the trail a piece. I might make a slip and spill things." He watched the other ride into the ranchyard. In the back of Boot Hill's mind was a vague idea about straightening out this identification matter after the shooting was settled. It would be one hell of a surprise to Pete then and. . .

He dropped to the ground and slipped up toward the side of the house. The shade on the window was drawn but it didn't quite reach the sill. Removing his black sombrero, he peeked in. The first thing he saw was the new neat furniture in the ranch-house front room. Then he saw Sarah come in from the kitchen with a pot of steaming java. She wore glasses now. Before he hadn't noticed what fine straight-forward eyes she had.

Pete, his brother, appeared on the stairs. He walked with a cane. But still there was something upright and defiant and unbreakable about him. The toil and strain of the years had seamed his face. But you sensed you might crush him under but you'd never make him call quits. He gripped Hanny's arm fondly as the other told what had occurred.

Boot Hill saw his brother's head turn toward the road. The ex-outlaw realized Hanny must be telling him about him, then. He turned and walked quickly down from the window. For the first time he realized what he had thrown away when he hit the owl-hoot trail.

After a while, Hanny came out and mounted and rode down to the bend. "You don't know what you've just done, Curly. Pete's worked like a horse all his life to build this outfit. When the dam begins to operate next spring, this'll be real fine range. And if we're licked tomorrow—well, Pete might as well ride out right now."

They headed for town, Cully's Hill. "He won't lose," Boot Hill said grimly.

AN hour after dawn the next day, the independent ranchers gathered in the old blacksmith's barn at the top edge of Cully's Hill. Boot Hill himself stood out in front of the barn a few minutes, looking over the town as it emerged from the grayness and swirling ground mist. It wasn't really a hill, just a low rise out of the mesa. The town hadn't changed much save for a couple of new stores and the new steeple on the Baptist church. It made something in him turn over with a queer sickening flip-flop. It was good to be back.

Then he tightened his mouth and turned and walked inside. They were a silent gloomy-faced bunch. "This is King Todd, the man we hired," Hanny introduced him.

A few nodded. One said, "Well, it's too late now. Moss ran a coupla first-class gunslingers himself last night. The word is he's paying 'em two-fifty a-piece if they's no trouble—and double if they is."

"They must be plumb walking hell with smoke-poles at that figure," another said.

Boot Hill sat on an anvil and let them have their say. The election booth was down at the post-office in the middle of the town's main street.

The local folk were sticking to their homes till they saw the outcome of the showdown between Moss and the little men. The booth opened for balloting at seven sharp. One reported that Moss had his whole outfit waiting down in the trees at the foot of the slope.

"They'll come swinging up the road and then we gotta walk smack down it if we gotta vote. Then—shucks, what's the use."

"We could bunch up in front of the post-office," a one-armed rancher said.

"And get burned down like a lot of milling cattle?" another snapped back wearily. "We gotta march down and take—"

BOOT HILL stood up, throwing away his cigaro. He asked Hanny how many men Moss had at his back. They numbered up about a dozen better than the independents and their hands. But Moss' cowhands were hired because they were hardened gunslingers first.

"And if the towns-people see you voting and got a chance—they'll swing in behind you and vote for your man?"

"That's the way the land lies," a bearded man put in. "We gotta march down and try to cut through and—"

"Hell no!" Boot Hill snapped. "That's just what he wants you to do. Don't be danged fool sheep! Don't play his game."

"What do we do, Mr. Smart Aleck?"

"Any of you got friends living here?" A few nodded.

"All right. You'll get in their houses, at front windows. The rest of us will slip in alleys. That doorway of the General Store is deep and dim because of the wooden awning out front. Then we'll wait for him to come up the hill and the road to the post-office and open fire. It won't be out-and-out stand-up scrapping. That's what he wants. It'll be skirmishing, sniping off men. Sabe?"

A few of them began to grin and nod.

"Suppose they go back and then swing up to take us in the rear on either side, catching men up front in alleys and houses?" the one-armed man said, squirting a rusty horseshoe with tobacco juice.

"I'll post men out back to cover just that. He'll fire a shot and you fellas on that side can turn around and strike from the back end. All right?"

"What're you going to do yourself—at your fancy price?" one asked.

"I'll be up the road a little, ready to close down and stop any Moss man reaching the post-office," Boot Hill said casually. But that was going to be a grim job. They started to file out, checking guns at the last minute, saying little. It was all or nothing for these little fellows....

The stage was set. Boot Hill knew it as he hunkered behind the ragged stump of that lightning-riven tree not fifty feet up from the post-office. His men were planted in a few houses and in alleys and behind porch stairs, silent and hidden. But if anything went amiss and the Moss bunch crashed through, he himself would be trapped.

DOWN the broken wooden sidewalk the three townsmen on the election committee walked quickly and nervously, turned out in their Sunday best, holsters at their hips. One of them carried a sign: "Balloting here." They kept their eyes pinned at the bottom of the slope. Then they were half running toward the post-office building. For the first Moss riders had swung into side past the cutbank.

Even as the key grated in the post-office lock with voting due to open legal in fifteen minutes, the Moss outfit was pushing up into Cully's Hill at a handlope. Then Boot Hill's quiet yet powerful voice broke out.

"Stand back from the voting place, riders! No man wearing a gun can go within ten yards of it! Stand back—or shed your hardware!"

The first two riders reined in. Then dish-faced Moss himself pushed forward, peered up the deserted street. He said something and

they laughed. "I'd feel plumb naked without my hogleg," one rider guffawed. And they came on, slower and more guardedly. Those in front had their guns bared, glittering in the new-risen sun.

"Ten yards!" Boot Hill repeated. But they came on, and on. "I warned you," he called. And his gun spat. It was the signal. The lead rider leaped free of a wounded horse crashing under him.

The whole Moss outfit, breaking and swinging and seeking a target, cut loose. Four slugs jetted dust fairly near Boot Hill. Moss bawled something and they spurred their ponies in a charge. And the spasmodic but sharpshooting fire racketed from the windows and alley fronts. Two more men went down, one lying motionless, the other fleeing as he limped.

But the Moss men barged right on in, crashing lead at the windows and at the fleeting glimpses they had of snipers from doorways and behind steps. One of the Independents reeled out of an alley. But big Boot Hill leaped from his open post and ran down, cutting an avenue before him with his spiking lead. He seized the man and got him back to cover, taking over his post.

The Moss men turned at a shouted order and swept back down the hill. But it wasn't for far. They knotted in a parley. And then they came up again more slowly, certain trained trigger men such as they could chop down the little more than a handful of desperate ranchmen.

ONE of the latter slanted a shot from a second story window. And four Moss men slashed lead back at it in reply. The rancher up there dropped his gun down the front of the house and tumbled backward, cursing a busted arm. But two of that Moss quartet were knocked from their saddles by the retaliatory fire, one of them rolling limply in the dust, a hole in his forehead. Still the Moss men forced their way up, trying to gang up on each sniper. Another of the ranchmen was hit.

And then two Moss horsemen broke from the rest, spurring their ponies wildly. Weaving and curveting as they came, they got opposite the post-office and landed running.

"Git in there and hold it!" Moss bellowed through the din.

Boot Hill was glad he had held his fire then, waiting to see what their play would be. He slid from the alley and cut down toward them. At twenty paces, he knocked the leg out from under one and sent him tumbling in the alkali. The other, almost in the doorway, turned and slammed lead at Lark. But he went to his knees as he got a flesh wound in that thigh grazed last night, then shot the man dead through the chest. He folded up under the sign "Balloting Here."

That ended that sortie. The Moss riders retreated down to the cutbank. They confabbed again. Sweat pouring from beneath his sombrero with the strain as the fiery sun mounted, Boot Hill wondered why they were so careful to keep in sight. It would be a better game to disappear and let them do some guessing and—

There was a shot from the rear of the alley where he stood. Fearful, he whirled and limped back through it. But there was nothing to worry about. A gleeful member of the independent ranchers stood there calmly blowing on a smoking gun. He was the one-armed one. He gestured with the gun where the movements of the underbrush showed the passage of a

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man working his way down the side of the hill.

"Saw him all the time and let him git right close—then I winged him neat as you'd stitch a seam," the one-armed one boasted.

Out front, some ten minutes passed. Then a Moss gunhand came walking up the hill with a piece of yellow cloth tied to a stick. "Wanta parley," he yelled.

Boot Hill waved for him to come on and went down to meet him. One of his men yelled to him to watch for tricks. The Moss man gave him the boss' message in a loud voice. "Moss says you won't let us vote and you don't dare come out and vote yourselves or you're whipped. It's a deadlock."

"We like it," Boot Hill answered.

"The boss says to let's save a heap of killing. We'll send two men up the road and you send two down to duel it out. All right?"

BOOT HILL took that stub of cold cigaro from his lips, looked at it, then tossed it away. "All right," he said as if in answer as to whether he would sit in at a game of penny ante.

It was quiet as he returned back up the hill. "Who's going to meet them two gunslicks Moss imported last night?" one of the men called from a doorway.

"Everybody hold your positions," Boot Hill said first. "I'll be one to meet them."

It was quiet again. None of the rest wanted that almost sure-death assignment. Then Hanny emerged from behind a pair of steps.

"You can't do it alone, Curly," he said.

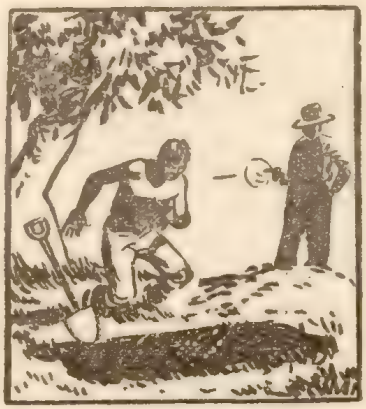
"If I have to," Boot Hill said with a shrug. "Going to be one hot day, ain't it? Pete get here yet?"

Hanny shook his head, toeing the dirt. Then he walked over and stood beside Boot Hill facing down the hill. "I git sorta nervous in a tight and don't shoot so danged straight," he said, a quaver in his voice. "But no pard of Hannibal Lark's goes alone against two while I'm around."

Boot Hill chuckled deep. "Slam

DIG HIM NO GRAVE

for



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shots at their legs the first break," he advised....

IT HAPPENED and was over quickly. Everybody watching figured the man called Curly was doomed.

The two men came up the hill, the special gunslingers, both swarthy and beard-stubbled, of a height. One had long, apelike arms. The other had a red shirt. They trudged up very businesslike; this was a cut-and-dried job to them. Their hands were thumb-hooked in their sagging shell belts.

And then Hanny, swinging along beside big Boot Hill, cursed with the tension. And all eight hands were digging toward holsters. It was Boot Hill who flashed up his guns first. But his boot hit a hidden stone in the dust and he almost went over. Red Shirt fired and Hanny spun out of the fight with a slug in his right shoulder. The pair darted sideward, spreading, as their muzzles swept toward the lone Boot Hill.

He leaped forward right at them, zigzagging. He rode those triggers. People saw the slice of blood stain his cheek where lead nicked him. And then the gunner with the apelike arms was flat on his back in the gutter with a red stain on his chest which wouldn't grow much bigger because his blood had stopped circulating.

Boot Hill flung himself flat on his right side. The red-shirted one had ducked behind a post. He furrowed earth not inches from Boot Hill's head. And then the latter's right gun crackled and Red Shirt staggered screeching from back of the post, a foot, the one thing he hadn't gotten covered, smashed. Boot Hill's next shot came a split second later and took Red Shirt flush in the teeth, passing out the back of his head.

There was a long moment. Moss himself had ridden halfway up the hill. He stared. Then he whirled his horse and went dashing pell-mell down the hill. After a few seconds he and his remaining bunch pulled out, his power broke in the Strip. Boot Hill grinned a little as he stood blowing at the gun-smoke curling from his Colts muzzles....

THE VOTING had started as a jubilant town milled on the streets once more. Boot Hill himself, known as Curly, was the center of an admiring throng at the bar of the Lone Star. Over the heads of men he saw his lame brother, Pete, ride up the hill in a buggy, Sarah smiling proudly at his side. Boot Hill started to push his way clear.

Things could be settled down and —Across the road, he saw a slim, brown-haired girl rush up to Hanny and hug him carefully around his arm in a sling. That would be Mary Ann, Boot Hill knew. He turned back to the bar and picked up another drink. It was going to take some thinking out.

Five minutes later, he saw a couple of strangers ride up, looking around. One was Little Packy and the other was Holy Joe Wince. They passed on, heading for the other bar, Boot Hill knew.

And then he knew the answer to everything. It came all in a rush and it was hard to take.

But when he slipped out the back door unnoticed in the excitement, his decision was made. He had left a note for "Mr. Bird," Hanny, with the bartender. It simply said, "The real Hannibal died some time back. You keep right on being him for Pete's sake. Adios....Curly."

He hustled down behind the street until he picked up Holy Joe and Packy about to dismount at the other barroom. Boot Hill stole up the alley and whistled softly. They looked around. He called:

"Pick me up a horse, boys. I had a little private business to 'tend to the other night. We're riding again." He knew it was better that way. He could never cut clear of his old bonds. There was always danger of himself being exposed and bringing shame on his family if he did identify himself...."I wanta look up Spider Brane," he added as he saw them grin.

THE END

JOB FOR A LAWMAN

By Charles D. Richardson, Jr.

When Sheriff Ben Bunson rode out after Sweetster and Whaley for the murder of old Doc Files, he didn't suspect that a set of false teeth would make the difference between his life and theirs!

SHERIFF Ben Bunson thought a hell of a lot of the Saddlerock dentist. He'd known Doc Files when the latter first set up practice here. Doc had been the one really responsible for Ben's election. A man doesn't forget things like that in a hurry.

Bunson's flint eyes were moist as he raised Doc's head from the floor. "You're going to pull through, Doc," he said.

The repressed rays of the office lamp shed a spectre glow on the wounded dentist. Doc Files stared weakly at the grown man he'd seen mature from a gangling tow-head kid.

Files coughed up a crimson froth.

"You're a liar, Ben. That slug in my chest—I reckon it's done the trick. Hell, a gent can't live forever. But—but it was kind of sudden-like. Still got work to do on that bicuspid of yours. Jumpy yet and—"

The sheriff wet his lips. "Doc, tell me one thing. Who did it?"

Doc Files coughed again. The blood foam on his lips bubbled.

"Them hellions, Sweetster and Whaley. In here less'n an hour ago. When I told him to clear out, Jute fired pointblank. He—he scooped up a set of teeth from my case, popped 'em in his mouth. They couldn't of fit, the way he was jawin'. Then when Whaley kicked my head, I—I—"

The life-light in the old eyes flickered, went out. The slender hands, once so deft with the drill and forceps, slid from Bunson's brown hands, like polished marble.

Bunson lowered the white head to the floor. He was hefting his six-gun thoughtfully as his deputy came in.

"Got the boys together," Joe Pettis said. "Figured you'd want to get after the killer pronto."

The lawman stared. Pettis shivered under the cold glance. "This is a personal matter, Joe," Bunson said quietly. "A man don't need an army to wipe out a couple of skunks. Get the coroner to take care of Doc."

He was out the door and saddling his horse before the moon had peaked the distant hogbacks.

Bunson rode alone to Spur Valley. He did a lot of thinking. Cat Sweetster the toothless, and Jute Whaley his pard. A hell-spawned pair of the devil's brood. Gunmen with a price on their heads, they had eluded justice for years. Bunson, the sheriff before him, and the lawmen the county throughout had trailed them. Their hideout yet remained a mystery.

And now they'd killed poor old Doc. Ben Bunson swallowed, and the red scar on his forehead flamed. Those two riders passing him swiftly about an hour ago as he'd galloped to town, were the ones he sought. Sweetster and Whaley, with Stetsons pulled low over their faces.

Two killers and a pair of false teeth. Destination—somewhere in ten-mile Spur Valley.

"And they're holed up where you'd least expect," mused the sheriff, but as the hours lengthened and the moon ploughed a silver furrow across the black plush of sky, he began to think he was bowling the wrong alley.

HE rode on doggedly. The least likely place. The idea persisted. Why not in the open some place, like the letter in the waste basket he'd read about. Struck with the thought, Bunson pulled his bronc to the left.

He reined in before a tumbledown shack overrun by honeysuckle and climbing morning glory. Granny Mattox's place. The old woman lived alone here, squeezing out a few paltry pennies from three milk cows and a bunch of chickens. Bunson mopped his perspiring neck.

"Reckon it's got me loco. If they were near, Granny would ot let me know. She wouldn't stand for killers nohow. Still—"

He had about decided to push on, when he saw the blob of waving red. A piece of cloth caught on the sharp barbs of the buckthorn by the fence.

Upon such things, insignificant things, often hinge matters of vital importance. That piece of crimson cloth belonged to Cat Sweetster, had been torn from the bandana he wore continually around his scrawny neck. Bunson slid from the bronc and cat-footed up to the porch.

Gun drawn, he slid past blind covered windows and slid noiselessly through the front door. In the darkened hallway he made out a blurred figure. Bunson glided forward, gasped. Old Granny Mattox herself, trussed up in a chair like a sheaf of oats.

Deftly he removed ropes and gag. He leaned close to catch the faint words the old lady was saying.

"Sweetster and Whaley're in the next room. "T-they've kept me prisoner here for months. Every time they'd go out, they'd tie me up so's I couldn't get help. Ben, Sweetster's a devil. He—"

Bunson squeezed the wrinkled hand reassuringly. "I'll tend to those birds."

He tiptoed to the door at the rear

of the hall, threw it open suddenly.

Sweetster and the wasp-hipped Whaley slowly raised their arms. Sweetster cut loose with a vivid oath. "What in hell you want, law-dog?"

Ben Bunson's flint eyes crackled.

"You," he said stonily, "For the murder of Doc Files. Doc talked before he died. Sweetster, it's a crime to bother with a trial. I ought to slug you down here and now. But I'm still a lawman. You two are going in town to jail."

As Bunson moved to disarm them, Sweetster's green eyes flicked to the table leg near his boottip. Upon the table rested the ornate brass lamp which lit the room with brightish red. Sweetster's foot moved sideways.

"Reckon you got us, sheriff," the bandit said slowly. "Whaley, it looks bad. Unless we get help—"

The table upended suddenly, catapulting the lamp in a flaring arc to the floor. There was a brittle crash and the room was cloaked with darkness.

Cursing Sheriff Benson dropped bellywise to the floor. Inched several feet to the right. Tricked, he didn't intend betraying his position by sound. If only he could catch some movement from the others.

BUT Sweetster and his pal knew the value of silence. Not even their breathing reached the strained ears of the lawman. Bunson knew that Sweetster wouldn't make a sound. The way of the expert gunman. Sweetster kept his six-shooter in perfect condition—clean, oiled, silent for instant use.

The stillness thickened. Bunson squirmed. Someone must make a break soon. Who would it be?

A sharp click to the right cut the muteness like a knife. The cocking of a six-gun hammer! Bunson froze, Colt pressing expectantly in the direction of the sound.

The room rocked with gun thunder. A flare of blinding yellow, to Bunson's left. Bunson triggered immediately, twice at the huddled figure thus silhouetted. Someone groaned, and there was the distinct thump of a falling body.

Silence poured a damper over everything.

Bunson struck a match with cupped hands. Gradually he allowed its feeble rays to touch about the room. Two darkened shapes sprawled in opposite corners, unmoving. The sheriff raised the blinds, admitting a spray of moonlight.

He grunted at what he found.

It was Whaley who had stopped Bunson's bullets, not Sweetster as Bunson could have sworn. Sweetster lay in a grim heap—to the right. It was he then, who had made the first sound. "Sweetster," muttered the sheriff unbelieving, "Why in hell—"

The door behind him creaked and old Granny Mattox humped in. She took one look at the dead men and grinned.

"By gosh, son, you sure convinced 'em," she said.

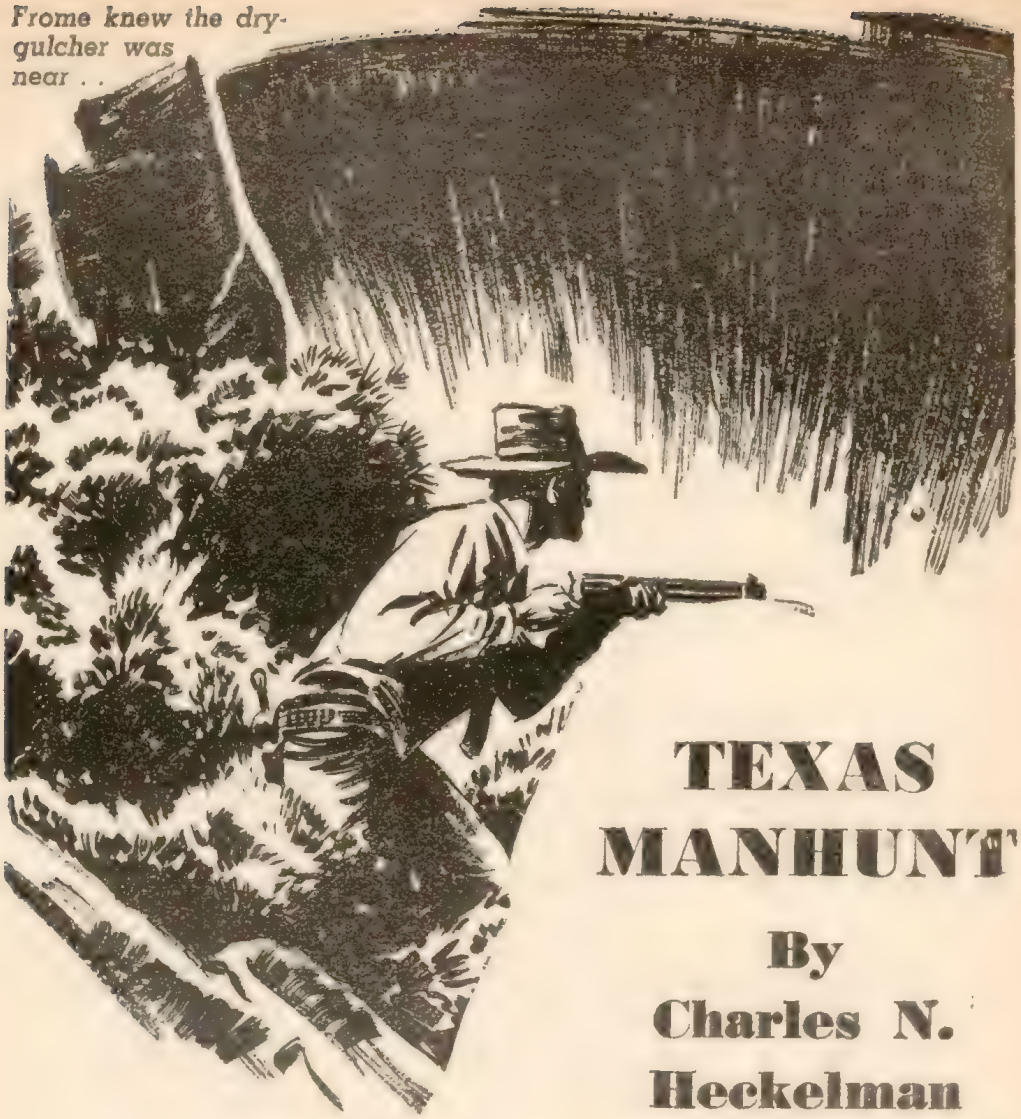
The little old woman stared at Sweetster. "And all over a set o' teeth. Sakes alive, the skunk acted like he was proud of it. Bragged to me what he'd done. An' them teeth clickin' like sixty all the time. It's a wonder he didn't pick a set that fit."

Sheriff Ben Bunson was looking fixedly at her. Suddenly he snorted, drew out a briar pipe and lit it.

"It's open and shut," he said presently. He told what had happened in the darkened room. "You see, Whaley heard Sweetster and fired, thinking it was me. Then, of course, I got Whaley from the flash of his gun."

"But Je-upiter," Granny Mattox shifted her glasses and squinted. "You just now said that Sweetster's gun never makes a sound before it's fired. How come?"

"It don't," he said. "Sweetster committed suicide, so to speak. It was the teeth he stole that gave him away. Made both Whaley and me think it was a gun clicking. Old Doc Files—God rest his soul—is squared. Those grinders of his turned out to be the best little skunk trap this country's ever seen."



Frome knew the dry-gulcher was near . .

TEXAS MANHUNT

By Charles N. Heckelman

Bill Frome thrived on danger. That's why it was just natural for him to think of posing as his own killer, after he settled with the unknown bushwhacker Llano Gibbons had put on his trail!

BILL FROME vaulted from the saddle and landed, sprawling, in the dry dust as a bullet droned through empty space over his head, and the sharp blast of a rifle echoed up and down the low Texas hills.

He had his own Winchester in his hands and was throwing it to his shoulder when a faint plume of smoke lifted from a clump of manzanita on a ridge seventy yards away. Grimly, then, his finger found the trigger and squeezed.

The rifle butt slammed against his shoulder. Afterward, a shrill cry of pain knifed into the stillness. A dark, bulky, human shape tumbled out of the brush and skidded end over end down the shaly slope.

Bill Frome, Texas Ranger, shrugged. He had a mild, sun-tanned face, twinkling gray eyes, and long lips that seemed to be always on the edge of laughter. Nothing could disturb his serenity, not even this attempted ambushing or the fact that he'd been forced to kill a man.

Before abandoning his position he scanned the surrounding terrain with eyes that were singularly alert. No other shot came; he concluded that his dry-gulcher had been alone.

He moved warily to the bullet-smashed body, and hunkered down beside it, and studied the dissipated, bearded face peering lifelessly up at him. He had never seen the man before, yet instinct told him that someone was aware of the nature of his mission in Remson.

In a pocket of the ambusher's alkali-stained pants he found a scrawled letter which threw considerable light upon the situation. It was addressed to Ned Lury who was, no doubt, the man at his feet.

Ned Lury:

A friend of mine tipped me off that you'd be a good man to do a job for me. It's a killin' job. The Rangers have been houndin' me since I busted outa the pen.

Some jasper I knew in prison just wrote that the Rangers know I'm nidin' out near Remson. How they found out I don't know. But I heard they're sending Ranger Bill Frome on my trail as soon as he cleaned up some rustler business in El Paso.

You bein' in El Paso makes it easy for yuh to lay for this ranger on the trail to Remson. Yuh can find out what he looks like in El Paso. You tally his hide and there's a job for yuh in Remson joinin' a new owlhoot bunch I'm formin'. When the job's done ride to Remson. Ask the barkeep in The Cattleman how to git to Gill Larkin's spread. That'll be me under my new name.

Llano Gibbons.

Bill Frome was whistling when he finished reading the note. This case was getting to be interesting. So Llano Gibbons, who had once been jailed for forgery, and more recently had been serving a ten-year term for stage robbery and rustling, was running beef under the name of Larkin!

Since his escape months ago from the State Prison he had apparently dropped out of sight. But recently the Texas Rangers' office had picked up rumors to the effect that Gibbons was in hiding near Remson.

Scanning the letter again with narrowed eyes, Frome let his heavy eyebrows knit together in a frown of absorbed concentration. There was something about it which troubled him, gave him no peace.

He was trying to remember how Llano Gibbons had first gotten into hot water with Texas law. It was on a forgery charge, but the specific circumstances eluded Frome's groping thoughts. And he wondered about Bud Meeker, one of Gibbons' outlaw friends, who had gotten away at the time of the stagecoach raid which had resulted in Gibbon's capture, the wounding of several guards, and the death of all the other outlaws.

SUDDENLY Frome came to a decision: Since his mission involved locating Gibbons and bringing him back to El Paso, what better way was there to accomplish that than by assuming the identity of Ned Lury and posing as his own killer?

The idea was intriguing; reckless by nature, and with a devil-may-care grin for trouble whenever it came his way, Frome found himself assailed by a feverish impatience.

He took time to roll Lury's body into a narrow culvert, and cover the outlaw with rocks so that marauding coyotes would not be able to disturb the grave. Then, he mounted and rode on toward Remson....

Three hours later Remson lay behind him and he was following a rough, winding trail toward "Gil Larkin's" cattle spread. Stunted trees, clumps of mesquite and prickly pear, and long stretches of malpais shimmered in the waning heat of the afternoon sun.

He had followed the instructions in Gibbons' note to Lury. The surly bartender at The Cattleman had given him directions to the two-bit ranch operated by "Larkin."

Now as he topped a ridge and came within sight of a weathered log structure, a barn in a virtual state

of collapse, and a sagging corral holding fifty head of scrawny steers, he knew he'd reached his goal.

The place had a deserted, neglected air. But the horse standing hip-shot beneath a cottonwood told him it was inhabited.

Frome jogged down the grade. Long before he entered the yard a man strolled into view and leaned a heavy shoulder against the door-jamb.

Frome was whistling. A wild light of adventure danced in his gray eyes, though his muscles began to bunch in his shoulders—a sure sign of the strain he felt. He recognized Gibbons by his lantern jaw, his unrelenting eyes, and his slovenly appearance. He was a morose, surly man, embittered by his experience in prison. Though he had never actually killed a man, it was rumored that he had taken a vow to shoot on sight the first Texas Ranger he ever encountered.

Gibbons drew a worn, cedar-butted Peacemaker .45 out of his holster.

"Far enough, stranger," growled Gibbons. Suspicion washed tawny color into his eyes. "Time to speak yore piece."

"The handle is Ned Lury," murmured Frome, his voice gentle but wary. "I reckon yuh've heard about me."

GIBBONS' taut features relaxed. He returned his gun to its scabbard, motioned Frome inside the house.

"Meeker was tellin' me," he said with a flatness that left the ranger a little puzzled. "He'll be right back —went to the creek for some water."

"I got Dan Frome," announced the ranger.

"Got who?" demanded Gibbons tartly.

Frome reached into a pocket, and when his hand emerged it held a silver star on a silver circle.

"I dry-gulched the Ranger on yore trail. Here's the proof!"

The badge sailed across the room, struck Gibbons in the face. The outlaw cursed, made a dive for his gun. Frome moved like greased lightning. The muzzle of his Colt was sweeping out of leather when boots scuffed behind him and a hard round gun barrel bored into his back.

"Hold it, Ranger!" came a harsh command. "So yuh thought yuh could pass yoreself off as Ned Lury! Maybe yuh didn't know I'm a friend of Lury's."

A tall, black-haired man with beady eyes and flashing white teeth in a swarthy face, stamped inside the room.

"What's this about ambushin' a ranger? And how did this jigger get on our trail?"

Gibbons was glaring at Bud Meeker, his black-haired pardner.

With two guns menacing him, Dan Frome managed a tough, twisted grin though he was trying to decide whether or not Gibbons was putting on an act.

"Why it's simple, Gibbons," he said. "That note yuh sent to Ned Lury to down that ranger, Bill Frome, and come here to join—"

"I don't know what yuh're talkin' about!" shouted Gibbons, his broad shoulders rippling under his sweat-stained shirt. "I don't give a hoot what yore name is. But if yuh're a law-dog, I'm gut-shootin' yuh here and now for all the hell the law has given me in the stinkin' pen."

Gibbons' gun was centered on Frome's chest. His knuckles were whitening around the grip. Death was reaching inexorably for Frome. Desperately he sparred for time, tearing his gaze from Gibbons and swinging his attention to Meeker.

"Better tell yore pard what's goin' on," he suggested. "He might think yuh're workin' a doublecross."

"Shut up!" growled Meeker. "So Lury missed yuh. Well, I won't miss —not at this range, lawman. You were a fool to barge in here without bringin' help."

GIBBONS was cursing now to gain attention and for the moment he abandoned his notion of shooting the ranger down in cold blood. Frome had noted the sudden suspicion which flared in the renegade's eyes at his mention of the

word, "Doublecross"—had seen the aroused interest Gibbons had placed upon Meeker. At the same time, Gibbons' ignorance about the note to Lury suddenly clarified things in Frome's mind.

He suddenly remembered the circumstances of Gibbon's first run-in with the law, realized a lot of things he hadn't noted before. Gibbons' harsh talk broke into his reflections.

"Meeker," growled Gibbons. "You'd better do some talkin'. What's this note and who is this jigger, Lury? Damn yore hide, talk!"

"I'll tell yuh," cut in Frome hurriedly. They had taken his gun, and now he watched both men with a strict attention, waiting for the first sign that their vigilance was waning. "Meeker found out the Rangers had picked up yore trail here, so he hired a gent by the name of Lury to bushwhack me.

"The funny part of it is that the Rangers weren't after you so much as they were after yore pard, Meeker. Of course, yuh didn't know that, not bein' able to read newspapers."

Frome never finished what he was about to say. He saw the whitening of Meeker's trigger finger, knew this was the payoff. He threw himself forward, got a grip on the back of a chair and whirled it at Bud Meeker.

Meeker's six-gun roared. A bullet seared Frome's ribs. Laughing wildly, tauntingly, he flung himself upon Meeker. They wrestled for the gun. Gibbons fired wildly. A slug gouged splinters from the floor, as Meeker and Frome threshed about, pounding each other with fists.

FROME got a grip on Meeker's wrist, wrenched savagely. Meeker held on. The gun twisted toward Meeker. There was the sound of a shot, then Meeker went limp.

Frome rolled clear, lashing his voice at Gibbons.

"Wait, Gibbons, yuh're in the—"

But Gibbons wasn't waiting.

"No damned law-dog is takin' me back to the pen!" he screamed in berserk rage. "Here's lead for yore guts!"

The outlaw's gun winked redly. The bullet struck Frome's left arm. Grimly Frome lifted Meeker's gun, aiming low to knock Gibbons off his feet. But Gibbons dropped, trying to dodge, and the bullet caught him full in the chest.

He collapsed and fell to the floor. Life held on in his body by a frail thread. Frome got up, lurched to the outlaw's side.

"You bull-headed fool," he said and this time his smile was gone. "I was tryin' to tell yuh that you were in the clear. Since yore escape from prison the Rangers have been studyin' the evidence turned up on yore case.

"Meeker was doublecrossin' yuh all along. When you were ranchin' several years ago, and Meeker was yore foreman, he was the gent who forged yore name on that stolen bank check and cashed it.

"A bunch of blank checks were stolen at the time and you were blamed because you were deep in the red. Yuh lost the ranch and went to the pen for a stretch. After that yuh turned outlaw. The law never investigated much at the time of the forgery because everyone was hot against yuh. It was only recently we learned you couldn't read or write—that yuh couldn't have forged that check.

"One of Meeker's close pals confessed that Meeker did that. The jasper was caught in a bank hold-up and wanted to have a clean slate before he cashed his chips. It was Meeker who wrote that note to Lury to kill me. Meeker had seen an El Paso paper, I reckon, in which it mentioned that the Rangers were seeking him and yoreself on the matter of a re-trial on the old forgery charge.

"Since you weren't wanted for murder—only rustlin' and stage robbery—and since you were framed for the forgery yuh might have gotten off easy."

Gibbons smiled wearily. It was too late for that now. He'd been an outlaw, and this was trail's end....

THE END

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CATTLE KING

by Lee Floren

THE trailherd was strung out for miles, a long wavery line of scrawny, thirsty cattle. Texas steers plodded wearily on, their scraggly coats covered with traildust. The last waterhole was miles behind, and nobody knew when they would hit water again.

Saddle-tired cowboys kept the beasts prodding forward. The steers were red-eyed and on the fight. One cowboy touched spurs to his jaded mount and loped up to the point of the herd. Here a wiry middle-aged man rode point.

The cowboy said, "They're gettin' purty proddy, boss. They're so dry their tongues is draggin' in the dust. How far do you reckon it is to water?"

"Not very far, Jim. About ten miles, I'd reckon."

The cowboy looked at him in surprise. "You ain't never been over this trail before, have you, boss?"

Charles Goodnight smiled. "No," he admitted, "I haven't. But there are ways to tell when you're close to water. Jim."

"How, boss?"

Charles Goodnight pointed at some birds in a shrub. "Them birds don't live far from water, never over ten miles. I say we hit water inside two hours. Wanta lay a little bet on it, fella?"

"Figger I wanta throw my dinero away?"

The cowboy rode back to his flanking position, and Charles Goodnight smiled. He was a congenial man, this man Goodnight, and he smiled often. But, when the occasion demanded, he could be hard and deadly.

Born in Illinois in 1836, he came

True Fact Article of the Old West

West when in his teens, and settled in Texas. He grew up with a horse between his legs and a gun on his thigh. Then the Civil War broke out.

Should he fight for Texas, and thereby turn against the land of his birthplace, the North? He settled his problem by joining Cureton's Texas Rangers. He became a Ranger scout.

When the war was over, he went back to cattle. The trailtowns of Dodge and Hayes were booming, and Charles Goodnight went north with thousands of head of native Texas steers.

One drive, on the old Loving trail, saw Charles Goodnight lose two-thirds of his herd to hunger, thirst and Indians. Therefore he struck off a new trail across the Staked Plains. One stretch of this trail was without water for almost a hundred miles. Salt beds and alkali lakes made the trip doubly dangerous. For the thirsty cattle wanted to drink from these deceptive waters. Some of this water could kill a steer in but a few minutes.

It is estimated that 250,000 head of cattle alone went over the Goodnight trail. The Army needed the beef to feed the Indians, now on reservations. Steers sold for about eight cents a pound on the hoof and about sixteen cents dressed. The drives were always in danger of an Indian attack.

Charles Goodnight and Loving were partners on these drives. Finally, an Indian killed Loving, leaving Goodnight alone to boss these long treks. Later, Charles Goodnight met John Chisum.

Chisum would buy cattle in New Mexico and Texas and Goodnight would then drive them into Wyoming and Colorado, for the northern cattle ranges were stocking up with Texas cattle. There, the Indian had also been forced to reservations. The buffalo was gone, and the Indians needed beef.

AT FIRST, Texas cowmen thought they could drive a herd into Montana or Wyoming, and then just let the cattle graze on the blue-

(Continued On Page 86)

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(Continued From Page 85)

joint grass or bunchgrass. But they had reckoned without the terrible Northern winters. They neglected to cut hay and stack it and, as a result, the winters killed off almost all their cattle. The only cattle that managed to live through were those that got in the foothills and ate bunchgrass on the sidehills. For on the sidehills the wind would blow the snow away and leave some bare soil.

Though a hard man, and a fighting man, Charles Goodnight hated violence. He tried to discourage indiscriminate gunfights and killings. Being a trailboss and responsible for the safety of his men, he set up a government of his own while they were on a drive.

Curly Tex, one of his riders, shot and killed another cowboy. Curly Tex was taken into Goodnight's trail-court. A jury was selected. Witnesses both for the dead man and Curly Tex were introduced and had their evidence offered to the court. But the jury found Curly Tex guilty of murder.

A wagon tongue was propped up, and Curly Tex was hanged.

Due to Goodnight's strict justice, there was little violence in Texas until the bloody Lincoln county war started, and then the blazing star that was Billy the Kid entered the cattle-country, bringing in its wake death and destruction and tears and sorrow.

Charles Goodnight was honest. He hated a double-crosser. With those he admired and called his friends, he was generous and free. But when he came across a thief or killer, his dark eyes would show anger, and hell would break loose.

And this time, Goodnight owned one hundred thousand head of cattle, and controlled some two million acres of Texas land. He was one of the Lone Star state's real pioneers. A cattle king.

He hated rustlers. Almost all his life was devoted to fighting cattle thieves. For, at this time, rustlers over-ran Texas. They stole Texas longhorns and sold them in Mexico to the Mexicans. They ran them

across country to New Mexico. They stole whole trail herds and drove them north.

Goodnight solved the problem in two ways. Those he caught, he shot it out with, often killing them or, if he did not kill them, he wounded them so he could take them into court. But he had another plan, too.

He used powerful glasses to watch the rustlers. Hidden on some brushy butte, he would watch the men below him through his glasses. He would see them round up cows and calves and steers and haze them to their hidden corrals.

Then, either he and his men, or the sheriff and a posse, would ride down on the unsuspecting rustlers. Usually, guns would boom and men would be killed, for rustling was a serious offense, and was sometimes payable with death by hanging. The cattle-thieves were taking no chances on Goodnight and his crew. So, instead of hanging, they would prefer to shoot it out.

The rustlers never got wise. They could not understand how their hidden corrals had been found or how anybody knew they were branding stolen cattle at that particular time. They did not know about Goodnight's field-glasses. But they soon learned to leave Charles Goodnight's range cattle be. Rustling practically stopped on the Goodnight ranch.

MOST of his life was concerned with fighting the Apaches and Comanches. But he had many good friends among the Indians. One time an Indian rode into the Goodnight ranch.

"Me wantum see Goodnight," he said.

Charles Goodnight came. "What do you want, fellow?"

"Our chief—he in jail. White man aim to kill him. He no guilty. He ask for you to come to him. Other people no understand him."

"I'll go."

When Charles Goodnight got into town, a mob had the old chief out of the jail, and was going to lynch him.

(Continued On Page 88)

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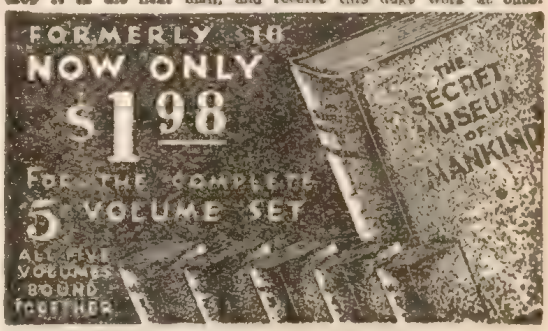

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(Continued From Page 87)

The old Indian kept hollering, *"Buenas Noches, Buenas Noches!"*

The whites thought he was saying, "Good Night, Good Night." For *Buenas Noches* is a Spanish form of salutation, meaning the same as our English, "Good Night." Therefore, the whites thought he was saying good-bye to them.

In reality, the old Indian was calling for Charles Goodnight, his old friend. Goodnight straightened up the affair and the old Indian rode home, thanking his stars that Charles Goodnight had arrived in time and cursing because he had not said "Good Night," instead of *"Buenas Noches."*

Charles Goodnight died at the age of ninety-three. He had lived an adventursome life and he had helped build the West. He was one of Texas' real pioneers. The Lone Star State, and the United States, owes much to Charles Goodnight, and men of his great stature.

THE END

FAMILY TREE OF THE COW PONY

Fact Article by

Kenneth P. Wood

FOR many years the efficiency of American-bred horses has been recognized all over the world. This is exemplified in the fact that whenever a European nation finds itself threatened with war, one of the first acts of its government is to send agents to the United States for the purpose of purchasing horses for army service. At the outbreak of the present global war, thousands of American horses were shipped to France. The animals which were sent abroad as the result of this ac-

tivity were thus afforded opportunities to see the countries of their ancestors. for all horses in the United States come of Old World stock, there being none on the Western Hemisphere at the time of America's discovery by Columbus.

The first horses brought into any part of the land known as North America were landed in Florida by Cabeca de Veca, in 1527—forty-two in number—all of which perished.

Florida also received the second importation, brought by De Soto in 1539. In the year 1609 the English landed at Jamestown, in Virginia, having only seven with them. In 1629 Higginson imported horses and other domestic stock into the colony of Massachusetts Bay. Four years earlier the Dutch Company had brought them to New York, then known as New Amsterdam.

It is believed that the progenitors of the great bands of wild horses that once roamed in the Southwest were the animals abandoned by De Soto when that adventurer started down the Mississippi on a raft, in which mighty river he found a watery grave. They could hardly have descended from the horses emancipated by the Spanish troops at Buenos Aires in 1537, since these could never have penetrated the swamps and jungles of the Isthmus of Panama and Central America.

It is the height that distinguishes the horse from the pony. An English equine authority tells us, "A horse below 13 hands (four inches to the hand) is styled PONY; above that height, and below 14 hands, a GALLOWAY." We find, however, that locality has much to do with determining the answer to this question. In various parts of Britain the size of a pony may vary from 13 hands 3 inches to 15 hands 2 inches, while in America 14.2 seems to have been agreed upon as the maximum for this type of mount.

However, the distinctive features of Spanish horses, which, in turn, were of oriental origin, have always been observable in the Indian ponies of North America, some having beau-

(Continued On Page 90)

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(Continued From Page 89)

tiful heads, fine limbs, and even the varigated colorings of the Andalusian horse which we term "calico" or "paint." When white men first penetrated the Far West the Indians of the northern belt of the United States had no ponies. Only the Apaches, Commanches, and other tribes in the South were horsemen. The Sioux, Crows, Blackfeet, and representatives of the Five Nations went afoot. It is only within the past century that the redmen of the North have been horsemen.

There seems also to be a difference in the type of animal in the South from that which we find in the North. Some judges claim that the Apache ponies, with those of Arizona and Mexico, may almost be considered a distinct and superior breed. Many of them are certainly of very high-bred appearance, almost showing the high quarters and lofty tail typical of Arabian blood. So marked is this feature that the Apache mounts, perhaps more than any other breed, unless it is the Exmoors, come the nearest to the Arab in appearance. They are nearly all of solid colors, and it would seem that if we have any American ponies that are hopeful subjects for careful selection and inbreeding they might be looked for in this family.

THE Indian mount seems to be the only member of the pony family that can be called indigenous to the United States, for as "mustang" and "bronco" his name at least is familiar even in those parts of the country remote from his Western home, while his powers of endurance and energy are recognized wherever he has been tried.

These sturdy little brutes have existed in a feral state for generations on the great prairies of the West, though it is certain that their beginning does not antedate the advent of the Spanish conquerors of the New World, because horses have not existed in North America for more than 400 years.

What but a pony could endure the

(Continued On Page 92)

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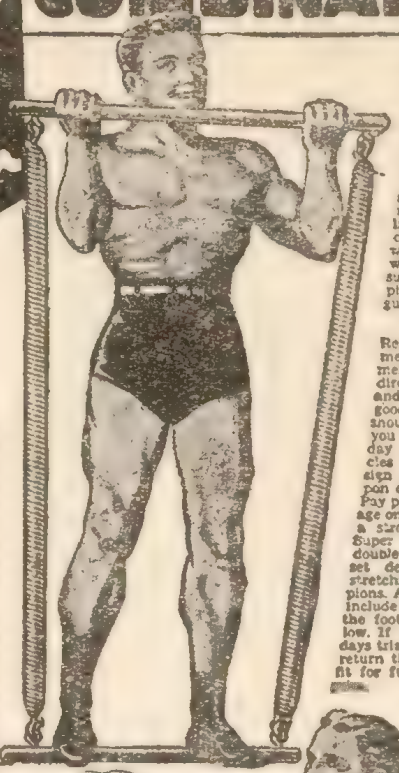

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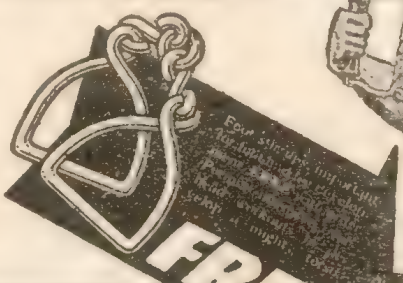

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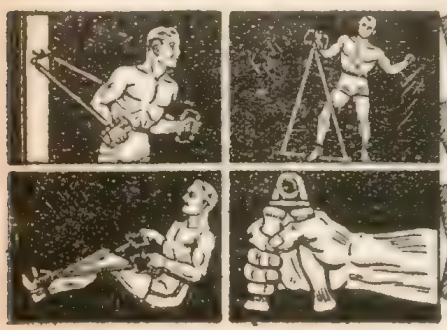

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(Continued From Page 90)

strain put upon it by many a cowboy, Indian, and pony express rider? Those who have hunted big game in the fastnesses of the Rockies are well aware that no animal but the sure-footed ponies to be found in the outfits of the guides could take them to the home of the elk, the "silver tip," and the Rocky Mountain sheep.

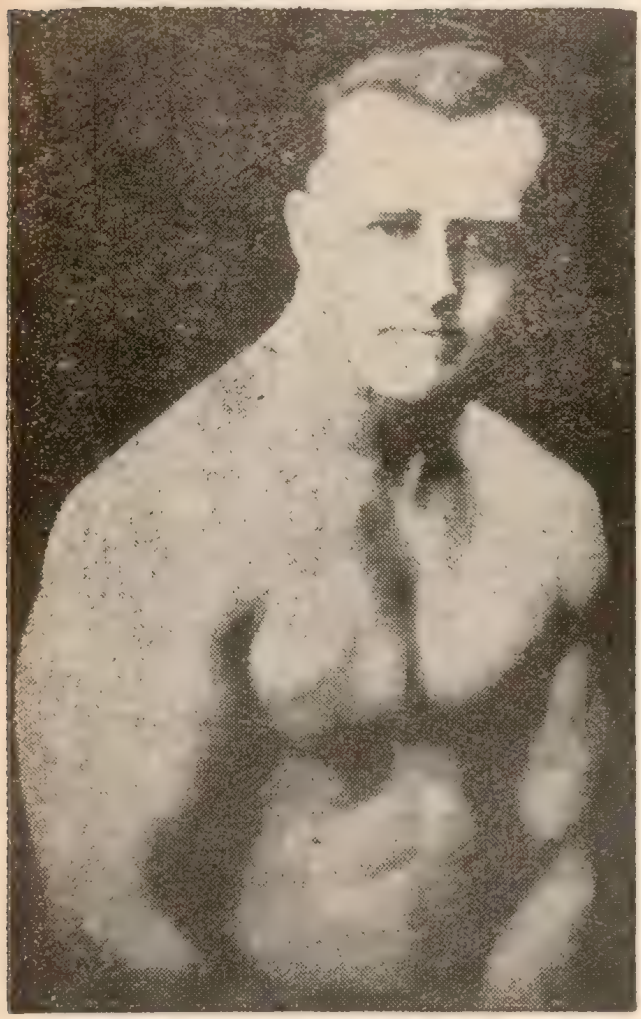
The record of feats of patient endurance accomplished by these little quadrapeds fill the pages of both history and fiction, and is the pleasant remembrances of many Westerners of long experience. The pony today is not only an important adjunct to cowboy life, but a first necessity, as much as a lariat or a six-gun, for there are still vast "open spaces," and rolling range land in various parts of the West that require the service of a pony just as it did fifty years ago.

The Pony Express kept open communication between the extreme West and East before the transcontinental railway was built. Back in the early sixties a stout little gelding of 14 hands carried a rider, the United States mail, and a heavy Texan saddle 125 miles over the mountains of Montana in twelve hours, without difficulty. In 1861 the riders of the pony express relayed President Lincoln's inaugural address across the continent in seven days and seventeen hours. The last mail pony running to Denver, made ten miles and eighteen rods in twenty-one and a half minutes.

Back in 1845 Samuel Lewis, of Delaware County, Pennsylavnia, rode an Indian pony from Ford Laramie on the Platte River to his home in Pennsylvania, a distance of over 1000 miles. Fro mthe start he carried blankets and firearms as far as Burlington, Iowa, about 700 miles, the weight of the rider and equipment being 165 pounds. At that point he lightened the load, bringing it down to 135 pounds for the last 300 miles. The entire distance, more than 1000 miles, was covered in thirty-three days, an average of thirty-three miles a day.

(Continued On Page 94)

"GEE! THAT MUSCLE WASN'T THERE LAST WEEK!"



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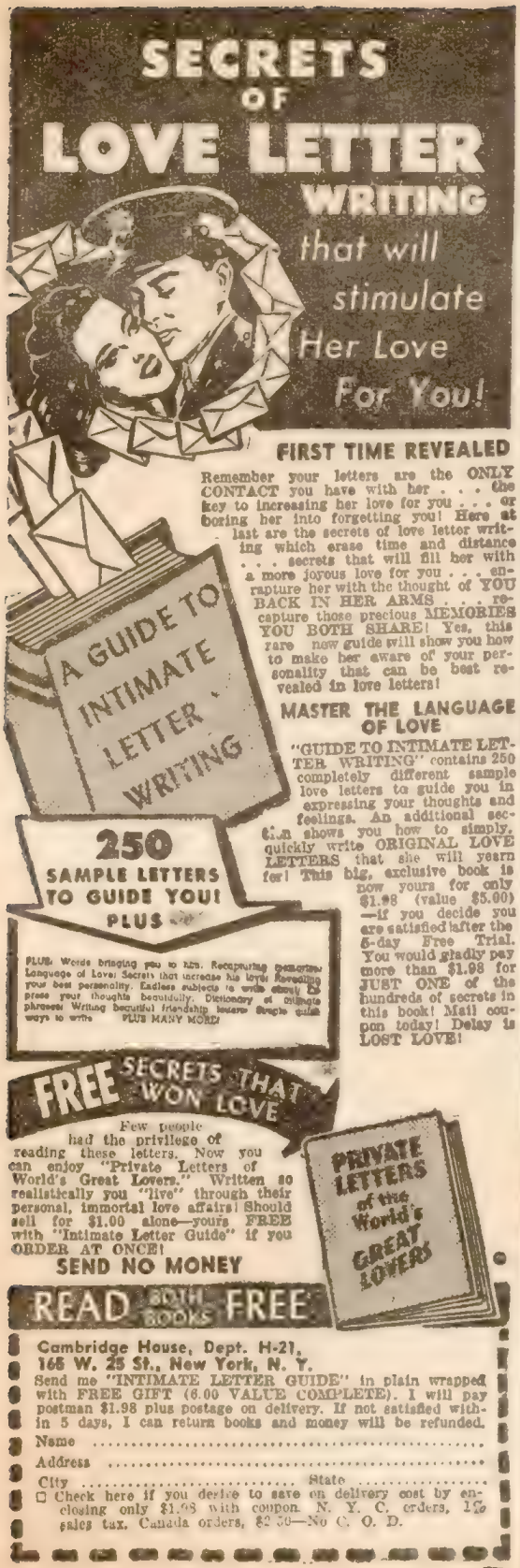
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(Continued From Page 92)

Just before reaching the end of his journey an innkeeper on the road — at Lancaster, Pennsylvania — offered to wager Lewis his night's lodging and the stabling of his mount, that the animal weighed over 500 pounds. He lost. The scales indicated that the pony weighed 493 pounds. The animal was a dun, only 12 hands high. Lewis had bought him from Sioux Indians, but was told he was a Shawnee pony.

The pampas ponies of the Gauchos of the Rio de la Plata, and the great plains of Uruguay and Argentina are not only interesting, but they are unique. They are doubtless descended from the Spanish horses liberated at Buenos Aires, as already noted. Many are not more than 12 hands high, but they are powerful beyond belief, capable of carrying a 200-pound rider unheard-of distances. These saddlers are fast walkers, strong at a gallop, and their intermediate gait is a running walk or single-foot.

A CAREFUL study has been made of these horses, and those bred on the grazing ranchos on the tableland of the Cordillera are taught this peculiar pace, which is a sort of running amble. This is not their natural mode of progression, but they are inured to it very early in life, and the greatest pains are taken to prevent them from traveling in any other gait. In this way the acquired habit becomes a second nature. It happens occasionally that such horses, becoming lame, are no longer fit for riding; it is customary to turn them loose, if they happen to be well-grown stallions, into the pasture lands. It has been observed that these animals become the sires of a breed to which the ambling pace is natural, and require no teaching. The fact is so well known that such colts have received a particular name—they are called "aquilillas."

While the American cowboy and his mount are somewhat restricted today, the usefulness of his pony is

(Continued On Page 96)

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(Continued From Page 94)

by no means a thing of the past. The bronc will never be substituted by a machine, for cattle must be roped and branded, and rustlers are still very much "on the prod."

However, the large roving herds of wild horses are no more, the last great round-up of these took place recently in the Northwest country which was their last stamping ground. The settlement of eastern Washington made it impossible for stockmen to raise range horses. Some of the larger breeders continued to raise them, however, using enclosed pastures, but the majority went out of business.

The extent to which this industry was carried on is indicated by the fact that more than 500 riders, mostly cowpunchers, took part in the round-up, and that 10,000 of the wildings were corralled, of which one dealer claimed 4500 as his own. The horses were originally common cayuses, but the strain had been improved by turning loose thoroughbreds and highly bred farm horses to roam with the wild ones. While thus the stockmen had hopes of finding many animals that would be shown fit for any kind of work after they were properly broken.

For a thrill many mounted spectators accompanied the herders on this last great round-up, and witnessed the passing from American life of a feature that has long marked the Old West, but not the passing of the cowlad or his pony, for cattle continue to multiply, and beef is still sold "on the hoof."

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PIANO STUDIOS, Dept. 908
1265 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

Please send me, by return mail, complete instructions by Professor Louis Ruben as explained in the advertisement, including the six popular songs, free of extra cost. I will deposit $1.00 plus postage with the postman on arrival (if you enclose $1.00 to save postage, check and sign name below). It is understood that if I am not entirely delighted, and I am sole judge, I may return for full refund within five days.

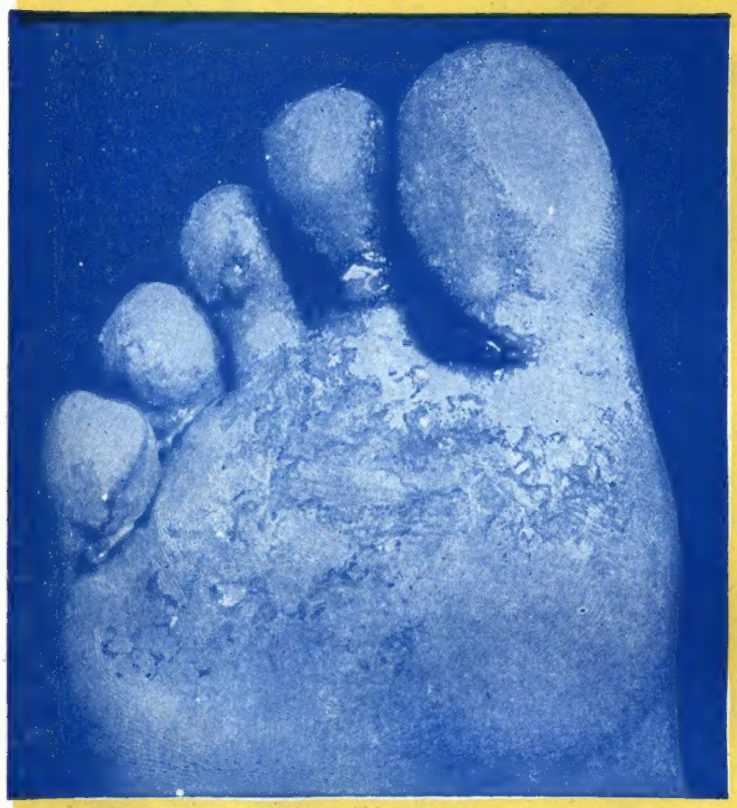
NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE .....

NOTE: Piano lovers in foreign countries and on board ships send $1.00 with order.

FOOT ITCH
ATHLETE'S FOOT



WHY TAKE CHANCES?

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to destroy the germ, whereas, upon contact, laboratory tests show that H. F. will kill the germ Tinea Trichophyton within 15 seconds.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of relieving Athlete's foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. H. F. gently peels the skin, which enables it to get to parasites which exist under the outer cuticle.

ITCHING OFTEN RELIEVED QUICKLY

As soon as you apply H. F. you may find that the itching is relieved. You should paint the infected part with H. F. night and morning until your feet are better. Usually this takes from three to ten days.

H. F. should leave the skin soft and smooth. You may marvel at the quick way it brings you relief. It costs you nothing to try, so if you are troubled with Athlete's Foot why wait a day longer.

H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us $1 for the bottle at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.

PAY NOTHING
TILL RELIEVED
SEND COUPON

At least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is both contagious and infectious it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

GORE PRODUCTS, Inc. DAF

813 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a bottle of H. F. for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you $1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE .....